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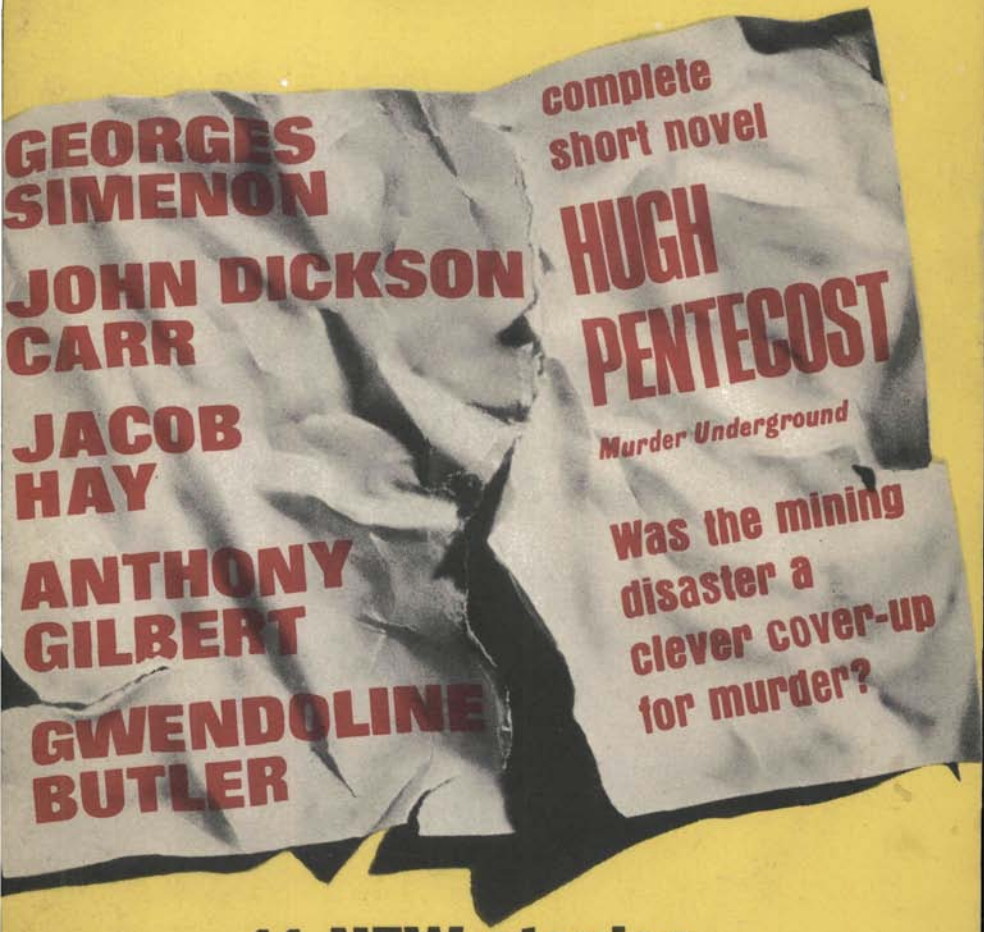

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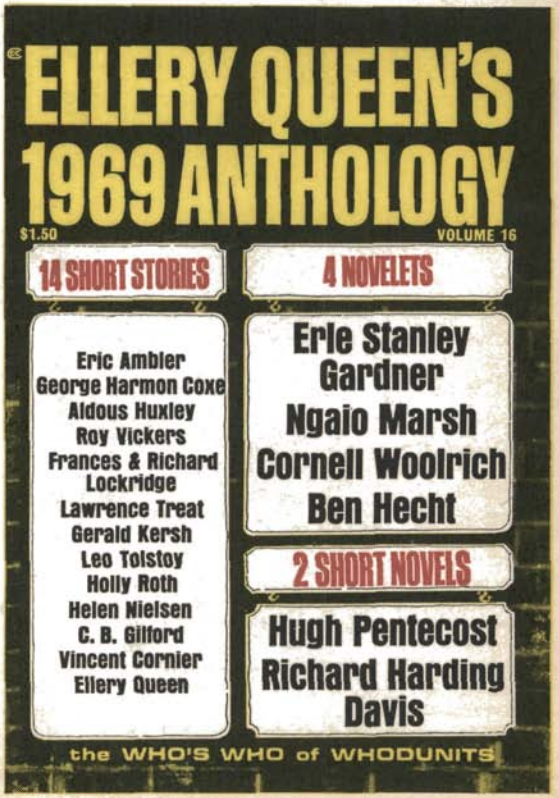

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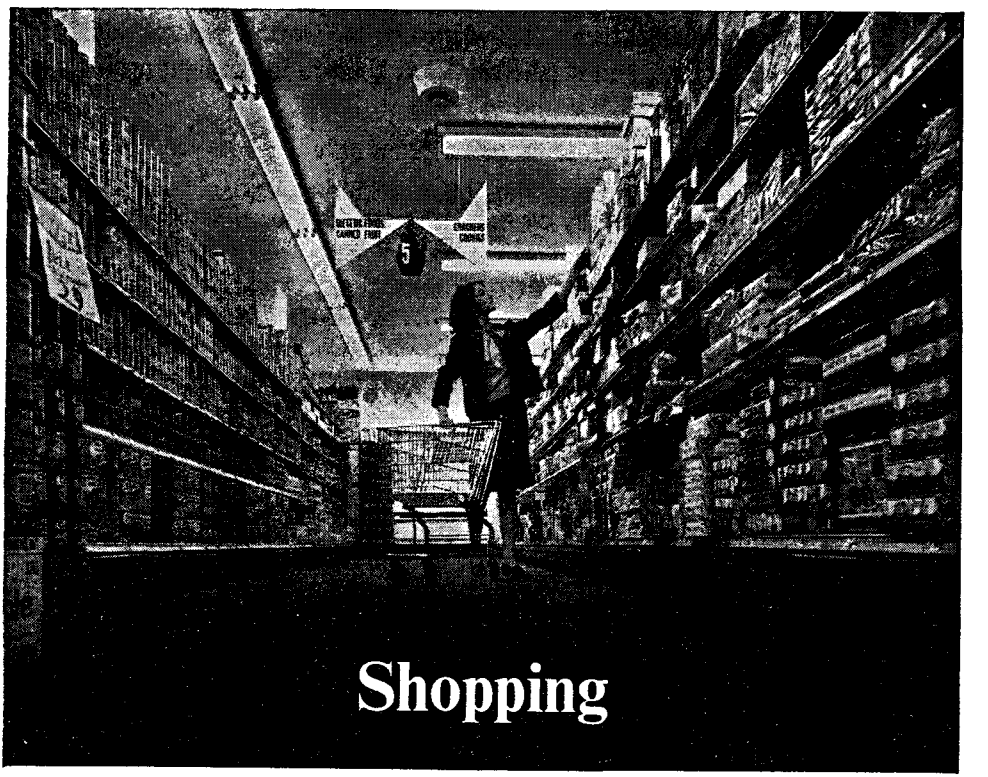
There are some people around who want to spoil woman's greatest indoor sport.



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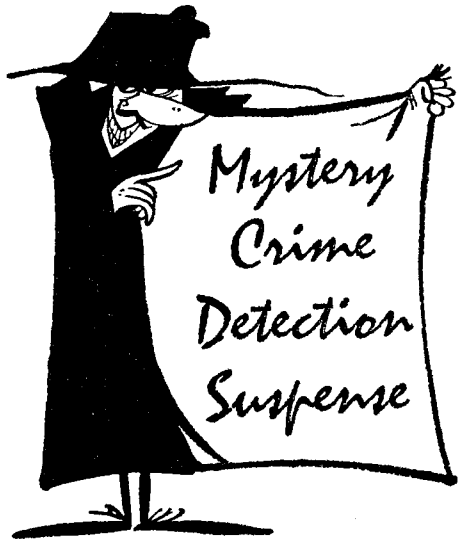

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GWENDOLINE BUTLER

We are happy to welcome Gwendoline Butler and her first appearance in EQMM. No doubt you've read some of her distinguished novels in the mystery field—perhaps COFFIN IN MALTA *(1965), and more recently,* A NAMELESS COFFIN *(1967).*

When you start reading a story in manuscript and don't care for the title it isn't necessarily a bad sign: titles are easily changed and often improved. But when you finish reading the story and realize that the title which in the beginning seemed unattractive or uninteresting is suddenly a fine title, a right title, a perfect title, then the story must have something—perhaps an indefinable quality, perhaps a quality you can't pin down or put your finger on, but surely, inescapably, undeniably, a quality . . .

THE SISTERHOOD

by GWENDOLINE BUTLER

I WAS SERVING THE FIRST COFFEE OF the day when the two women came in. It's a hot day, so I'm slow, but I'm a hard worker and I'm getting on with it. That's the picture I see looking back. I could do with help but conditions are bad just now and I don't get help. Frankly, I'm glad to have a job, and I need one. When my husband died (his Feed and Grain business failed the year President Grover Cleveland came into office) he left me penniless.

So I do what I can. I can make coffee and tea and serve it neatly, polish china and cutlery, and give the right change. Also I'm honest; I don't steal from my employers. My employer is the Railroad, an impersonal one but we get along well enough. It don't overpay me and I don't fill my basket with its coffee and sugar, and that's about it. We don't owe each other a thing. At first, I wondered if there'd be any talk about me serving tea and coffee, but no, no one said anything.

The two women came in so early I knew that there'd been another delay on the line. I don't think our

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Railroad will ever pay for itself while we have these little incidents so often. This time it was only the engine caught fire and no one hurt. These two women were the forerunners; I could hear other angry voices behind.

"It's only a little delay," one of them was saying. "We shall get there in the end. Only Father is cross; we need not be." She was a nice-looking young woman, plainly dressed in poplin, but not poor. I know the sort—no show but plenty of money tucked away in the family moneybags. Who controls the purse strings, though?

"And he's the one that counts," said the other one. So this answered my question: in this family it was the father who held the money. This woman was younger than the other one—not a girl, but a woman approaching her prime. She looked as though she feared this prime would come and go unnoticed. I recognized that keen searching look.

They had got on to the subject of marriage by the time I served their coffee, which showed how their minds were running.

"Marriages are made in heaven," the older one was saying. I suppose I've served thousands of cups of coffee and overheard thousands of conversations; but I've never heard anyone say that.

"Marriages are made with money, Emma," snapped the younger one. *Snap*. Her jaws went like little traps. Well, she was right enough there. "Father has the money and Abby will make the marriage."

"Do you think she will, Elizabeth?"

"Yes."

Father and Abby put in their appearance then. He had been held up by a quarrel with the engineer. Abby asked for iced tea and Father for water. He'd have an extra glass with it, please. I kept my eyes on him to see what he did with the two glasses. Father and Abby didn't sit at the same table as the two girls but a little way off. There wouldn't have been room for them, with Abby the size she was. She was wearing a fine silk dress, though.

"My, I'm hot." That was her size, of course. The dress was red silk too, which didn't cool her off any. "Do you have any cologne, girls?"

Elizabeth silently handed over a small flask of cologne for Abby to dab her face, and Father took some too and held the bottle while she fanned herself. This seemed to be his manner of doing his courting and Abby nodded and chuckled, and this was her way of doing hers. I never did get to see what he did with his two glasses. Perhaps he had some medicine to take, but he looked a fine healthy man that would live forever. He drank his water, though, then gave the cologne back to Elizabeth and put his hand down on the table near to Abby's.

So Abby sat there cooling off, insofar as she was able, and Father sat

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there warming up. Every so often he looked at the door as if he might get up and leave soon. It's true there were a few train noises every once in a while, but I knew better. There are only three trains a day through here. The 9:10 in the morning running west, which was now broken down. Then the midday train running east. Then the 5:00 p.m. train running west again. I knew they wouldn't be moving for a spell.

Then the girls started talking again in low voices.

"I don't think she looks at all nice," the older one said and I knew what they were talking about. They were talking about the only other customer.

She'd been there all the time. She hadn't come off the train. No, she'd been there waiting. She was wearing a watered silk dress and a satin-edged bonnet. She made Abby look cheap. I'd served her the first coffee of the day and she was still sitting there sipping it. She was going some place, no doubt, but I didn't know where and she was giving me no sign—I'm good at reading even very little signs. I'd say she'd come a long way. Was going a long way too.

"Not nice? What does that mean?" asked the younger one.

"Don't flash at me. I know what I mean. She looks worldly. Experienced."

"She looks interesting." Elizabeth was dabbing at her own face with cologne. "Clever. If that's what worldly means." The cologne was putting a shine on her nose. She had a plump face with full cheeks which might lengthen into a long hatchet face later. Now she was a bouncing young woman with the nearest to good looks she'd ever have.

The smell of cologne has done nothing for me since my husband died. Funny, I can smell coffee and feel fine. Cologne, and I'm sick straight away. I used cologne for him a lot in his last days. It was an easy death. I was there and I can tell you: it was an easy death, but he didn't want to go.

To take my mind off my nausea I moved closer to the girls.

"I'd like to get to know the world better," said Elizabeth.

"Perhaps we could go to Europe."

"With Father? With Abby? Does Abby look like a traveler?" No, Abby did not.

I'll tell you how I could get their conversation although they were talking low. I'm something of a lip reader. I taught myself; it's one of my tricks. They were talking soft but I could read them. Abby was talking away too but I couldn't read her. She had her head down. I guess Abby could lip-read too.

The other lady (unknown I was going to say, but of course they were all unknown to me) looked towards them. Just a glance. No more. But I'll bet her eyes and her observation were good. She was the sort that took everything in and wrapped it

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away in brown paper for future use. Funny way of looking she had—just glancing up under heavy lids and deep lashes. A pretty face really. Or had been. It was lined now, and she used rouge, too.

I just glanced at my own in the mirror. Ah, there was a *look* there. It seemed to me this look was growing and growing—the only live thing about me.

"She looks interesting, but she doesn't look honest. Not straight," said Elizabeth, as if she'd made a discovery.

"Not straight! The way you talk. Like a man."

Elizabeth seemed flattered as if she'd received a compliment and I can tell she's one of the simple ones who hasn't grasped that she *is* a man. That's why she'll never get a husband. Not because Abby has Father and Father has the money and money makes a marriage, but because she's a man and another man will notice it.

"More coffee, please," sings out the lady. It was a strange little voice, soft yet mighty penetrating and with an accent I couldn't place.

"She's an English lady," whispers Emma.

"Scottish," says the lady, in that gentle lilting voice of hers. She smiled. No one else did.

It was an encounter all right, I could see that, a real moment in life. I haven't traveled much, so I don't know where she came from; but it was a strange place, I'll say that.

"May I join you ladies?" She was carrying her coffee over to their table. "We must pass the time somehow, must we not?" She sat down close to Elizabeth. "It would be coarse and common to make a fuss. Still, it is tedious waiting."

"No," answered Emma.

"Yes," said her sister.

So that was the effect she had on them—not that they'd ever spoken with one voice, I reckon. Take care, I wanted to warn them: she knows something you don't know and if you don't watch out you'll know it too.

There was plenty of noise going on outside. Not the noise of a train which was what they were hoping for, but the noise of something, and I could see Abby and Father looking curious. They'd soon be out there to investigate. I knew what it was. It was a funeral. We have noisy funerals in this little spot. Well, we have had lately. And there have been so many of them. Why, we die off like flies round here.

Abby was heaving herself up and out of the room and Father was hurrying after her, as if his blood was hot, whereas you could tell by the cut of his suit it was cold. It was going to be a marriage all right, the sort I knew about. A kind of exclusive club with only two members.

A suitor of my own came in as they went out, brushing against them with an apology. At least, I supposed he was a suitor. He's always in here talking to me. He sells

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insurance. I don't imagine he thought he would sell me any. My buying days are over. I bought some for my Willy; that's enough for one family; I won't be buying any for myself.

"I heard the noise," I said, nodding outside. I gave him his coffee.

"Yeah, terrible sad thing. Maisie Gray."

"I heard she was going."

He drank his coffee.

"Bad time?" I said.

"Worse than most."

"I heard."

We stood in silence for a minute. Our tribute, you might say, to the dead.

"So it wasn't an easy end? Funny thing. I'd have sworn Maisie was a woman as'd have an easy end. She seemed made for it somehow."

"Oh, they've all been bad lately. It's something in the season, I think." He sounded depressed. He kept in with the doctors and the undertakers in the way of business, so he always knew about the ends we made.

"Who was making all the noise out there?"

"Oh, Maisie's sister. Crying to beat the band. You heard? It was the *way* Maisie died," he burst out. "Little by little. One day it was a foot, the next day a finger. No telling what next. Then at last it was over her like wildfire."

"What was it supposed to be?"

"Some infection. That's the way they've been lately."

My Will had an easy death, but he didn't want to go, and for that you couldn't blame him. He knew what would be waiting for him. His brother whom he'd cheated, his mother he'd neglected, and his sister he'd help kill. He was leaving me this side, but I doubt that was much comfort to him.

"Was she insured?"

"No. She didn't carry insurance. There wasn't no one who benefited by her death. No one." He shook his head. "Bad business."

He went on drinking his coffee. Watching the three women at their table I saw Emma get up. I guessed the Scotch woman had sent her out. She knew how to say, "Do this," and it was done. She had a pretty elegant way of holding her lips when she spoke. I quite admired her. Elizabeth was just a good plain ordinary speaker. You wouldn't have picked her out from any crowd for the beauty of her diction. I could read both their lips fine.

"So kind of your sister to do that little errand for me. I feel the need for some cologne like you."

"She was glad to go."

"Yes." She sounded doubtful, forming her lips in a little cooing shape. "I think she doesn't like me."

"Emma doesn't consider whether she likes you or not, she doesn't know you." Only a fool would expect flattery from Elizabeth.

"Oh, you Yankee ladies are so smart. You put us poor European creatures to shame." She could live

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with her lies and even love them. Perhaps this was what she was going to teach the other one.

"Who is that woman?" It was my suitor speaking. I had forgotten him there drinking his coffee.

"I think she's a teacher."

"Where does she teach?"

I shrugged. It was my idea she was teaching right now. But I'd reminded him of something.

"Why do you do this work?" He pointed to my hands, red and stained. "You taught school once. You could teach it again."

"No," I said. "No school."

"She doesn't look like a teacher to me. No. I'll tell you what she does look like—" He frowned.

I could see them both in the mirror behind me, still talking away.

"Why, she looks like you," he finished, in a surprised voice.

"Yes." I'd noticed it myself. "Perhaps we're related."

"What? Not by blood."

"By blood."

"I don't understand you."

"Hush. Listen."

The two women were deep in conversation. I've never seen what that meant before. Now I saw it meant that they were talking at all levels. They were talking with their eyes, with their bodies, and with their silences. And some of the most important things get said that way.

"As soon as I saw you I knew you were someone I must talk to," the Scotch woman was saying.

"Do you feel that way often?" I cannot describe the peculiar note the speaker put into that question. Off-hand, sceptical, and yet profoundly interested in the answer. The one thing that perhaps she didn't want to show was what came across strongest.

"It comes. I can often tell when it will happen. I get a warning."

"So you were getting warnings while Emma and I sat here?"

"Before." She smiled. "Before. I don't say that's why I came here."

"You can't say that's why you came here. I didn't know I was coming here myself. We were going straight through but the engine broke down."

"As if that mattered." She still smiled. "But I don't say so. Notice, I *don't* say so."

They sat looking at each other.

"I am on my way to help a sister. An American girl married to an English businessman. In Liverpool. Cotton, I believe. She is in great trouble and I am going to help her. She has been rather careless, poor girl."

"She's an American girl and she is your sister? But you are not American."

"No, I was Glasgow-born. A Miss Smith before my marriage."

"And she's your sister?" Elizabeth was getting lost. I wasn't though. I was beginning to see my way. I've always been quick on the uptake.

Looking out of the window I

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could see Abby and Father pacing up and down; they were not talking. No sign of Emma. The funeral had become quiet. They were doing the burying, I suppose.

There's no noise louder nor stronger than the thud of earth against the box.

"I call her my sister," answered the Scotch woman.

"And what does she call you?"

"Oh, we've never met. No, I am on my way now to our first meeting. Even this may not be easy to do. No, it will not be easy to meet her, but I shall try. I know my duty."

"Well, I know *my* sister," declared Elizabeth. "I meet her face to face every day. That's what I call being a sister."

"You have many sisters that you don't know. I must teach you about them." See, I said she was a teacher.

"I know all I want to know about my family."

"Have you noticed," said the other, "that although this is a very hot day there is no sun? This is a sunless town."

This I had noticed. We all do. It can get quite trying in high summer. The deaths are always worse then.

"I don't want any more members added to my family," said Elizabeth, in a pointed kind of way.

"You mean the lady who went out with your Father? That makes you bitter?"

"I don't trust her. We should have our rights."

"Rights?"

"Money," said Elizabeth sullenly. Emma pushed open the door.

"I'm sorry I was so long," she panted. "It was impossible to find a shop open in the town for your cologne. On the way back I came across a large crowd in the town square and I had difficulty in getting through. I don't know what they were doing. Every so often a man would say something. But he didn't speak very loud."

We don't speak very loud in our town. You can't call our voices soft, but we don't raise 'em much. Except at funerals.

"Every so often someone would call out a name and then they would all be silent again. I wonder what they were doing?"

They must be starting the election for mayor. And that means Tom Edwards must be going downhill fast. He's younger than most. The average life expectancy in this town is 45, and we age quick. Tom's still a young man but he looks old. It's a shame he should go. He made a good mayor. He has a growth, I've heard. Back of his throat. Certain he didn't speak well these last years.

But a lot of us have trouble this way. We intermarry a good deal. There are only three or four big family groups, kin we call them, and we're all related. Tom's mother married her cousin. Some people said *his* father was also his brother, but I don't know about that. You hear these stories every so often

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round here, but I don't know that any one of them has ever been proven.

No one said anything to Emma standing there and in a minute she muttered something about getting some air and went out again. I doubt if they noticed her go.

"You must learn to defend yourself," the old one was saying. I couldn't hear even the breath of these words, I could only read them on her face. "Money is important. Yes, and you should have yours. A woman may get justice, but she must usually get it for herself."

"How can she?"

"A man won't give it to her, that is certain. Oh, he can be persuaded into it, but it has to be contrived. In the end one relies on oneself."

"I always do."

"Yes, you have made a good beginning, but it is not enough. Are you a woman of education? Anything of a scientist? A doctor perhaps?"

"No."

"A pity." She sounded regretful. "There would be so much scope for a sister who was also a doctor. Well, then you must exercise a good deal. Keep in good health. Develop your muscles."

"Why?"

"It may come in useful." She leaned over and felt the girl's arm. "Yes, I thought you looked strong," she said with approval. "Suitable bouffant sleeves will mask a lady's arm muscles. I should not advise you to make a show of them. Always think of a practical point like that. It may be the saving of you. Some sisters have wasted time on theory that would be better spent in attending to the practical details."

"And my legs too?" said Elizabeth, withdrawing her arm.

"Oh, I can't foretell the future. I can't tell you what your need may be. Perhaps at some future date I might advise a lady to cultivate strong legs, but I can't say. It may be that you will invent some ingenious little plan of your own that needs strong legs. I leave it to you. And in any case a strong mind and good manners are your best protection. Many a lady owes her life to her manners."

Oh, how I had needed someone like her in my life. She gave good advice. She said words I wanted to hear. I moved away unsteadily to sit down. My right leg always troubles me worse in hot weather.

"How lame she is, poor thing," said the young one. Much she cared.

"I'm afraid she has been badly used at one time."

"She may have been born like that."

"No. You can see by her face. She has not the expression of someone who has been used to it since birth. She has had to learn how to bear it."

"She's listening."

"Nonsense. She cannot possibly hear." So then I saw that my lady from Glasgow had this limitation:

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she only believed what she wanted to believe. I suppose this was what made her strong. Because she was strong. I'm strong myself and I could measure hers.

"If I might suggest," she was going on. "You might pay a little more attention to your dress."

"Ladies where I come from don't bother much with their dress."

"Ladies everywhere bother with their dress," the Scotch woman corrected. "A well trimmed bodice or a becoming hat can make a good deal of difference at your time of crisis."

"My time of crisis?"

"You will have one, my dear," she said softly.

"Ah." It was a long, long breath. I felt it more than heard it.

"And when that time comes you must accept your crisis. Be proud. Wear it like a crown."

"We don't have queens in this country. And I don't aim to be a martyr."

"Oh, on no account. They are our least successful members."

"Is this a sort of club?"

"Yes, but it's more important than that. More sacred."

"Do I take an oath or something?"

"You have already taken it."

"What?" Elizabeth recoiled.

"Yes. You took it . . . Now, let me see." She looked thoughtful. "You must have taken it a few minutes after our conversation began. When you said: 'I know all I want to know about my family.'"

And it's true, she had taken it then. From then on there was no looking back for her.

"Now you are one of us. My sister," and the Scotch woman stretched out a fleshy hand.

"So, it's a sisterhood," said Elizabeth, just beginning to take in what she had joined.

"Yes." There was a radiant smile. "Oh, we are a great band stretching out hands down the centuries. Mary Stuart was one of us, Madame Brinvilliers was certainly another."

And what about the nameless ones, I wanted to shout out, the ones who didn't get their names in history books?

"I remember my own initiation," the old one was going on. "I was walking in the country near Glasgow. The old crone frightened me with what she said. But I never forgot it." She looked amused. "Still, do you know, I believe I must have resolved then that when my time came it should all be neatly and tidily managed and nothing sordid like that old woman. Pah, I could smell the blood on her."

Elizabeth took a sniff of her cologne, for which I didn't blame her.

My suitor woke up. I'd forgotten him dozing over his coffee.

"It's all in the womb," he said as he came awake. He's the only man I know that would say "womb" right out. I think he drinks.

"What is?"

"Wickedness." That's another word he can say outright.

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"You'd better go off home."

"Thanks. I will."

He shuffled out. He'd be back tomorrow.

She was still talking about death when I turned back.

"Of course you must not take me literally when I say I smelled blood. What I smelled was probably something quite different. Dirt, I dare say."

"I don't think blood does smell."

"Not to you. No. You are one of the lucky ones. But it does to some people. Blood will never smell to you, or stick to you, or in any way worry you. You should be glad."

"I am."

"It was because I was tender of the sight of blood that I was obliged to find a different weapon. Come Louis, my love, I said, drink this chocolate, you will be better for it."

"And was he?"

"We must all be the better for casting off this world and its troubles, must we not? In the end."

She was willing to tell more.

"Mine was an affair of the heart, you understand? I truly and tenderly loved my poor Louis. But then he was poor, and showed no signs of trying to better himself." She sighed. "Poor creature, he tried so hard to cling to me. In the end I had to be brave for both of us. But I was too innocent to live then, my dear, and the result was there was a great deal of nasty talk, quite ill informed, and my trial had to be moved to Edinburgh."

"Oh, so there *was* a trial?"

"One cannot hope to escape all unpleasantness," she said placidly.

"And the result was?"

"The verdict was 'Not Proven'."

"And that means?"

"It means you go free."

"Is that all?"

"My dear, allow me to say that in the circumstances it is very nearly everything."

Elizabeth became quiet. She hadn't quite accepted the reality of all this, but it was coming. I knew her kind—slow to take anything in, but very tenacious. Hadn't I taught girls like her? I knew their ways. Obstinate, yes, and ruthless too. Stupid sometimes; you could talk to them forever and ever and get nowhere. Then *snap,* they took something in and it was theirs for life. She was like that.

"And never forget," the old one was saying. "You are a gentlewoman, and in that is your protection. Who will believe a gentlewoman could be violent? Go naked if you must to commit your deed. No one will believe it."

Elizabeth covered her ears with her hands. The other pulled them away.

"You heard me? You listened? You will never forget. Remember, we are sisters."

She was talking quite loudly now, not caring if I heard, but then she was a gentlewoman see, and I was just a stone in the wall to her.

I wanted to call out, "I'm here.

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I'm listening. You are talking to the converted. Can't you see we look alike? I have done my deed, I am one of you, I am your sister. I gave my husband arsenic in his coffee. And I did it all on my own."

Perhaps I ought to have been proud of my independence.

The train was going to come in soon, the one running east. Already I could hear a noise in the distance. The woman from Glasgow got up, gathered her possessions together, and slowly moved towards the door. We watched her go.

The train came in and still we stood, silent.

Then Emma put her head in at the door.

"Come on, we are going back home. Papa has canceled the trip. We are going back on this train."

Her sister still stood there. Emma became impatient.

"Come on, Elizabeth. Come *on*, Miss Lizzie Borden."

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a detective *SHORT NOVEL* by
HUGH PENTECOST

complete in this issue

Hugh Pentecost has probably written more detective stories with unusual backgrounds than anyone else in the field. Here is a short novel, complete in this issue, with one of his most unusual locales, a coal mine . . . a mining disaster—yes, they still happen despite all known safety devices.

Now, a mine explosion or cave-in is a terrible tragedy. Those close to it—the miners who risk their lives daily, and their families—can possibly look on it as an "occupational hazard." But ex-Major Gary Slade, a veteran of Korea and a trained investigator, but inexperienced in all matters pertaining to a coal mine—Gary Slade had reason to believe otherwise. He thought that the mine had been deliberately booby-trapped, that murder had been committed in the coal town of Sheridan, and he set out to find the truth . . .

MURDER UNDERGROUND

by HUGH PENTECOST

THE SHOT RIFLED OUT A LITTLE after eight in the morning, killing Mike Porlescue and burying him under several thousand pounds of coal that broke away from the face of the mine where he was working. It was a couple of minutes before the steam whistle at the top of the shaft began to blare its warning of disaster.

In the town, half a mile away, the whistle didn't attract immediate attention. It was part of their daily life there. The whistle sounded for man trips, up and down, for hauling up the coal cars from the mine, for lowering timbers for shoring. All day long the whistle chattered away in its private language. The long urgent disaster warning had not been heard for many months.

The town was really just a street,

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with a huddle of small frame houses at each end of it. In between the houses on one side was the Red Apple Bar and Grill and the bank building and what had once been a chain store. The blue front with the gold letters on it was still there, and inside were the empty shelves and counters.

On the other side of the street was Wingate's General Store and the Sheridan House, which still had remnants of red plush and gold brocade in its dusty lobby. Next to the Sheridan House was the only building in town that had seen a coat of paint in some years—the shining two-story frame house where Doc Maguire lived.

There was heat, hanging over the street in a blue haze, even at this hour of the morning.

At the north end of the street Mrs. Porlescue was on the front porch of the ramshackle one-story house where she and Mike lived, knocking a dust mop against the porch rail. When the whistle started to blow she paid no attention. She had been thinking about a promise she'd made to Joyce Perry, the district nurse, to go out to the Martin farmhouse some day and give it a thorough cleaning. Ben Martin and his sick friend weren't much at house cleaning, Joyce had told her.

Then, as the whistle continued its unbroken wail, Mrs. Porlescue seemed to freeze. She raised her eyes to look across the fields toward the head frame of the coal mine, rising forty feet into the air above the mine shaft. She squinted her eyes against the sun as she listened. Then, abruptly, she dropped the dust mop and started down the front steps.

Across the fields, a mile past the mine on the other side, was the sturdy two-story Martin farmhouse. There was a lilac hedge around it, brown with dust. There were two tall shade trees in the front yard, their leaves withered by the scorching August heat. There were no animals in the barn, nor any farm machinery.

Shades were drawn at all the second-story windows of the Martin house. In a bedroom on the ground floor a young man slept under a sheet. The sound of the steam whistle set up a vibration that started some object on the bureau top to rattling.

The young man woke, without realizing what had ended his sleep. He lay for a moment or two staring up at the ceiling. Then he turned his head and looked out the open window. He saw the glare of the sun on the waving brown grass in the fields. He turned away, as if the sight hurt him.

Then he reached out to the bedside table and picked up a pair of shell-rimmed glasses. The lenses were a dark green. He put the glasses on, felt for a package of cigarettes and a lighter on the table. He lit a cigarette, drew the smoke deep into his lungs, and lay

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there, staring through the dark lenses at the ceiling, and felt the sweat trickling down his neck, down his back.

It did a bad thing to him, because it reminded him of other times when the sweat had trickled down his neck and down his back, and the sweat had come, not from heat, but from fear and the insistent questions of his captors.

He heard the sound of a car door being slammed, out in the yard, and his teeth bit down hard on his lower lip. That would be Doc Maguire or that smiling nurse, with her alcohol rub and her collection of small talk. Like the sun, she never missed a morning . . .

Dr. Terence Maguire was in the kitchen of his house drinking iced coffee and reading the Chicago morning newspaper when he heard the whistle. Automatically, he glanced at his heavy gold watch. It was an effort to pull it out of the watch pocket of his trousers because his stomach lapped over. Eight minutes past eight.

He stuffed the watch back into his pocket and stood there, listening. There might come a series of short choppy blasts indicating that the emergency was over. When they didn't come he put down his coffee glass and started for the front hall.

Despite his flabbiness, Doc Maguire suggested strength and vitality. People said he was crazy to hang around Sheridan, a man of his ability. In the old days, when he'd been company doctor for Sheridan Coal and Coke, he'd had plenty to do. Now he was doctor in a ghost town. There wasn't much to do except to sew up a few cuts after the weekly Saturday-night parties at the Red Apple, and there was seldom any pay for that.

"Lived here all my life," Doc Maguire would say, when people asked him why he stayed, "and I don't mind saying I'll be fifty-four next birthday. It's home. So it's changed, but it's home. Money isn't everything, you know."

The phone rang as he reached the front hall, and he answered it. He listened, and his face seemed to grow hard. Then he hung up, slipped on his black alpaca jacket, picked up his medical bag, and went out to his car, which was parked in front of the house.

A thin-faced woman was standing a few feet from the car. She moved quickly up. "Someone hurt at the mine, Doctor?"

He nodded, putting his bag down on the front seat of the car.

"Many?" Her voice was harsh.

"One man," the doctor said.

He got into the car and drove off down the street. The thin woman moved quickly. A moment or two later other women appeared from the frame houses—four—five—a dozen. They began hurrying along the street, into the dusty wake of the doctor's car. Mrs. Porlescue was one of them.

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As Maguire drove up he saw that there was an empty truck standing on the big scale at the entrance to the mine workings, deserted by its driver. There was no one in the scale house. Two other trucks were backed up to the loading chutes, also deserted. Everyone was at the head frame—everyone who was aboveground.

Maguire parked his car near the washhouse and hurried toward the head frame, carrying his bag. Maguire had been present at mining disasters before in his life. In the old days, when S. C. and C. had been flourishing, there had been trouble belowground, even with all the safety devices, rock dusting, electric lighting, and what-have-you.

There was nothing to protect a man here. There was the shaft going down a mere hundred feet to the coal seam; the steam-powered hoist that lowered the men to their work and brought up the little car of coal to be dumped at the loading chutes; no electric lights, no way of escape except the safety ladder up the shaft.

Belowground were sixteen working places, each belonging to a miner, held up by pillars of coal and rough shoring changed each day. Each man did his own drilling, loaded his drilled holes with a black powder charge each day, set his fuse, and came up to the top. Then the shot firer went down, lit all sixteen fuses with the flame from his carbide lamp, and came up top himself.

The miners would stand there, counting the shots as they went off, to make sure no charge remained unexploded. Then they would go to the washroom, shower, dress, and go home. You couldn't go down into the mine until the next day. It took that long for the dust and possible gases to clear.

The next day you would pick out the coal the shot had blown loose from the face and load it into the little coal cars, put your sticker on it so they'd know it was your digging, and send it up—a ton, a ton and a half, maybe two tons if you were lucky. That done, you drilled into the face again, loaded your drilled hole with its black powder charge, set your fuse, tamped the hole with clay, and went up to wait for the shot firer to do his work again.

No shots were fired in the morning, for it would make the mine dangerous for the rest of the day. But a shot had been fired—at eight minutes past eight by Doc Maguire's gold watch.

The hoist had just come up to the top when Maguire got there. Men crowded off it, and automatically Maguire counted—twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, *sixteen!* No—only fifteen. The sixteenth man was Bull Teliski, who operated the hoist.

Ben Martin, owner of the mine, was the first man off the hoist,

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blond, muscular, his face and arms streaked with black dust. He walked over to the corner of the head frame, and Maguire thought for a moment that he was going to be sick. But he just took off his cap and knocked his carbide lamp against the corner of the frame. The white dust drifted down into a pile that had grown large from a thousand such lamp knockings.

Maguire went over to him. "Who is it?" he asked.

"Porlescue," Martin said.

"What happened?"

Martin shrugged. "Either we miscounted the shots last night or Mike forgot to tell us he drilled an extra hole and it didn't go off. When he started picking around on the face—a spark—blooie! Mike hadn't a prayer."

"He's down there?"

"A badly drilled hole, too." Martin said, as if he hadn't heard. "Shot rifled out. Blew him to pieces—and buried the pieces."

"It couldn't have happened that way—it couldn't!" a shrill voice said at Maguire's elbow. It was Stanley Harris, the shot firer. He was a little guy who worked in the scale house during the day and did the dangerous firing each afternoon about three. "We counted the shots. We counted them, Ben. You know I wouldn't make a mistake like that!" Harris was a small, wiry, ferret-faced man.

"I'm not blaming you," Martin said. "He must have forgotten to tell you he drilled an extra hole."

"No!" Harris said stubbornly. "He wouldn't forget. You know him—sober, careful. He wouldn't forget—not Mike Porlescue!"

A woman screamed, a long, wailing scream. Mrs. Porlescue had discovered who was missing.

There was an oxygen mask in the powder magazine. It was Ben Martin who put it on, and carrying a battery torch he went down alone on the case. He was to ring the bell, attached to the lanyard in the shaft, when he found Porlescue, and every ten minutes after that—or someone would come down after him.

The crowd waited around the head frame, silent except for Mrs. Porlescue's sobbing and Harris' repeated statement to anyone who'd listen. "We counted the shots, I tell you! They all went off! Ask anyone."

Nobody asked anyone. Counting or not, one *hadn't* gone off.

The bell at the top of the shaft sounded almost at once. Ben had found Porlescue. It rang again at intervals for twenty—thirty—forty minutes. Then it gave a sharp double ring. He was ready to come up.

Teliski started the steam engine, and groaning and whistling, it lifted the hoist cage to the surface. Ben was taking off the oxygen mask as it came into view. Lying on the floor of the hoist was something covered with a blanket.

A Scotch miner named McBane,

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a gray-haired man of fifty, was nearest the hoist. "You get him, all right?" he asked.

"Most of him," Ben said grimly. He looked around at the staring faces.

A blonde girl in a tight sweater came forward. Her mouth was brightly rouged. "He's dead?" she asked.

Little Stanley Harris, the shot firer, hurried up. "Louella heard the shot," he said. "She came over because she was worried for me."

"I'll bet!" Ben said.

The girl's smile was derisive. "You never let up, do you, Ben?"

"I've asked you to keep away from here," Ben said.

"Don't I have a right to worry about my husband?"

"You have a right to, but you don't," Ben said. He turned away from her and faced the others. "We counted the shots last night," he said. "They all went off. Somebody booby-trapped Mike Porlescue down there."

"You found something, Ben?" McBane asked.

"Nothing a killer needs to worry about," Ben said. "But you all knew Mike as well as I did. He wasn't careless. He was murdered, for sure. How do the rest of you feel about working down there with a killer?"

"Easy, Ben," McBane said. "You got yourself worked up."

Ben turned on his heel and headed for the washhouse. They watched him go. They all saw the blood, mixed with coal dust, on the front of his clothes.

There was no longer an undertaker in Sheridan. Someone phoned to Millwood, twenty miles away, from the phone in the scale house. The miners drifted toward town, and with them most of their women. Three women stayed with Mrs. Porlescue, who knelt beside the body under the blanket, rocking slowly back and forth. Maguire stayed. Harris stayed, whimpering about his count.

Ben Martin came out of the washhouse, looking clean, pale, and with his face set in hard lines. He couldn't have been more than twenty-seven or -eight. With the coal dust gone he looked out of place, more like a college boy than a truck miner. He went over to where Mrs. Porlescue knelt.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know words won't help, Mrs. Porlescue." She didn't answer. "This is a rough business—accidents happen."

Mrs. Porlescue lifted her tragic face. "Not accident!" she said, in her thick Rumanian accent. "Mike not make mistake! Mike not make mistake, I tell you!"

In the cool kitchen of the Martin farmhouse Joyce Perry stood by the sink, pretending to dry some silverware. Her hair was a dark rich red, cut in a careless bob. She looked cool in her white nurse's uniform. Her blue cloak was thrown over

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the back of one of the straight kitchen chairs.

The chore at the sink was not essential. Actually, she was watching the man who sat at the kitchen table, staring down through his dark-green glasses at a plate of bacon and eggs. After a moment he pushed the plate aside and reached for his cigarettes and lighter.

Joyce's eyes, usually bright with humor, shaded now with pity. "Gary, you're not eating your breakfast," she said.

The green glasses turned toward her. "My dear Miss Perry—"

"I thought we'd got to first names," she said.

"My dear Joyce—I do not want any breakfast."

"But you've got to eat breakfast!"

He brought his fist down on the table so that the china jumped. "Can't you let up—*must* I—?" He took a deep breath and slowly turned to look at her. "I'm sorry, Joyce. I'm an ingrown jerk." He pulled the plate toward him and picked up his fork.

It was the same every morning. He couldn't shake loose from it. The mornings had been the worst, because you knew that in a little while you would be face to face with it again—the Chinese general who smiled and smiled and spoke to you through an interpreter; the Russian civilian who had been brought up in the Bronx in New York and who made everything sound so chummy. All you had to do to be relieved of this was sign the paper.

You signed the paper, and then the world knew that Major Gary Slade, of Army Intelligence, admitted that the United States was using germ warfare in North Korea. It was so simple. All you had to do was sign the paper. There were no marks on your body. Your arms weren't twisted. There was no torture in the old melodramatic sense. But something was going wrong inside your head, and your will was weak, and it would be so easy to sign the paper.

When you could think, you decided it came in the food you ate —good food. A little while after you had eaten, it seemed such an easy thing to do. Just sign the paper. They'd understand, in America, that you couldn't help yourself. The statement was for use in the captive countries. Just sign it—just sign it.

Then there had come the morning when he had decided. He would sign. He couldn't take it any more. What did it matter? It wasn't a war you could win. The diplomats wouldn't let you win it. *He would sign,* and that was it.

That morning they came running for him. The Chinese general must be in a great hurry today. Such a hurry that the jailer shot the lock off the door of his cell! Only, it wasn't the jailer. It was a blond GI with sergeant's stripes on his

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sleeve and a submachine gun in his hands—a commando raid of some sort.

Major Gary Slade couldn't move. He was a traitor. He had decided to sign. The blond GI carried him out on his back, sobbing like a child.

He was a hero after that. How brave he had been! He had resisted every blandishment, every torture. Brave, heroic Major Slade! What they didn't know was that if Sergeant Ben Martin hadn't arrived when he did, the major would have signed . . .

The front door slammed, and Gary jumped. Sudden noises still did that to him. His cigarette dropped out of his fingers and he had to bend down and pick it up off the linoleum.

"Anybody home?" It was Ben's voice. He came into the kitchen. Gary straightened up. Ben was never home at this time of day.

"Ben, what's wrong?" Joyce asked.

Ben sat down at the table with Gary. "Got another cup of coffee?"

Joyce brought it. "What is it, Ben?"

He told them. Joyce's face showed her feelings. "The Porlescues!" she said. "They're one of the nicest couples in town. Not so crazy as the rest. Poor woman. She has no family, no friends. How could it have happened?"

"It *could* have been an accident," Ben said. "Only, it wasn't. We could have miscounted the shots when they were fired last night. Only, we didn't. Porlescue could have forgotten he'd drilled and loaded an extra hole."

"Not Mike Porlescue," Joyce said.

"I agree," Ben said. He sipped some of the steaming coffee. "But why would somebody try to kill him? That seems just as crazy. He wasn't a brawler or a fighter. He wasn't involved with any of the others. He just dug his coal and lived his home life."

"Could the man have wanted to die?" Gary asked, without looking at Joyce or Ben. "It would be a pretty fancy kind of suicide, but—"

"He'd never have left his wife uncared for," Joyce said. "He watched over her like a child. He loved her. I visited them while she had flu. I know how concerned he was for her."

"If it wasn't an accident, how could it have happened?" Gary asked.

"Somebody had to go down into the mine during the night," Ben said, "drill a hole in the face where Porlescue was working, and load it with a charge of powder."

"Where would he get the charge of powder?"

"The powder magazine—it's a shed near the head frame."

"So he gets this charge and goes down the mine—"

"He'd have to make it first," Ben said. "We're pretty primitive in

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some of our methods. He'd take a piece of broomstick, wrap several pages from a magazine around it, crimp the paper together at the bottom, pull out the broomstick, pour in the powder, crimp the paper at the top—and he'd have his charge. He'd put that in the hole he drilled and tamp it down with bug dust. Then—"

"Bug dust?"

"Any kind of rubble that was hanging around—slate dust, drill cuttings, that sort of thing."

"Go ahead."

"That's all. When Porlescue got working on the face with his pick this morning, sooner or later he'd strike something that would give off a spark, and that would be that!"

"And you'd be supposed to think he'd forgotten to report the number of shots he loaded last night—the count would be right when the shots were fired at the end of the day. So when this happened you'd think Porlescue had just been careless?"

"Right."

"Then why don't you think that?"

"Because Porlescue wasn't the careless type."

"Then it *is* murder."

"It could be."

"If it could be, why are you sitting here drinking coffee? Why aren't you talking to the cops?"

"Cops!" Ben laughed. "I'll tell you why. There's Ed Wingate, who runs the local store. He's justice of the peace and town constable. He couldn't catch anyone who stole jelly beans out of his candy counter. There's the State Police in Millwood. What evidence is there? Mike Porlescue was careful. But there's no evidence, you understand. The place where the crime was committed blew up—along with Porlescue. There's no evidence."

"So tomorrow you'll be working shoulder to shoulder down there with a murderer," Gary said.

Ben's lips tightened. "And I should do something about it?"

"You won't," Gary said. "Mr. Porlescue isn't important enough."

"Let me ask *you* something," Ben said, and his voice was angry. "This sort of thing used to be your business. You were a trained insurance investigator. Why don't *you* do something about it?"

"But I—"

"I'll tell you why! Because you lie around here like a sick old woman, staring at the ceiling and worrying about something you didn't do. Where are *your* heart and *your* nerve?"

Color welled up into Gary's face.

"Where do you get off telling me I won't act?" Ben continued. "You could do something about Porlescue if you weren't so self-centered!"

Gary turned his face away, staring down at the eggs on his plate.

Ben shook his head and got up and walked around the table. He

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put his hand on Gary's shoulder. "I'm sorry I blew my top," he said. "It's been a rough morning."

"No," Gary said. "I had it coming to me, I guess." He took a cigarette from the pack on the table, and lit it. "I've been here for three months and never seen this so-called mine of yours. Would there be any chance of having a look at it when you go down tomorrow?"

"You bet," Ben said. He looked at Joyce, who was smiling.

Gary saw the exchange of looks and he smiled, too, his mouth drawn down at one corner. "You ought to get married," he said to Ben. "You would be great at handling spoiled children."

Gary sat in his room, staring out across the brown fields at the scaffolding of the head frame—all he had ever seen of the mine—and tried to remember what Ben had told him about it. He hadn't been in a mood for listening for a long time. When people talked to him he had turned inward and busied himself with himself. Now he tried to bring back what Ben had told him.

Sheridan had once been a thriving coal town, with Sheridan Coal and Coke its life force. There had been hundreds of miners in the area in those days, working in a modern mine. Sheridan had not only been a coal center, but the outlying farms had been kept busy supplying its needs.

Cyrus Martin, Ben's uncle, had been one of those prosperous farmers. Then had come the big disaster at Sheridan Coal and Coke. Several hundred men had been killed and injured in a mine fire and explosion. It became a question of whether it was worth it to the owners to rehabilitate S. C. and C. or abandon it and go on to greener fields.

It was decided to follow the latter course, and overnight Sheridan became a kind of ghost town. The big mine was hopeless for anyone to work. Almost all the miners and their families moved on to get jobs in other fields. News came that jobs were not plentiful. A couple of dozen families, dazed by the suddenness of it, stayed on in Sheridan, held there by the hope that before long something might happen.

Cyrus Martin had agreed to lease mineral rights on his farm to the miners who stayed in town, and a shaft had been sunk and the primitive truck mine set in operation. It was hard work, dangerous work—but it was work. The fifteen to twenty men who dug out the coal by muscle and sweat made a living of sorts.

Cyrus Martin, a childless widower, had died, and it was discovered he had left his farm to his nephew Ben, a sergeant in the Army, who had never been to Sheridan in his life. When Ben got his discharge he came there. The farmhouse was the first home of his own he had ever had. The mineral rights gave

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him ten per cent of all the coal mined, a good living.

He decided to stay on, and he went to work in the mine himself. It was a satisfactory arrangement to everyone, it seemed. The miners had been afraid Ben might revoke the mineral rights and leave them high and dry. He had turned out to be a hard worker, who minded his own business, saw to it that whatever could be done for safety in the management of the mine was done, and gave them a sense of security for the future, meager as it was.

That was how Ben had come to settle down in the farmhouse, a part of the community, and yet not a part of it. It was here he had brought Major Gary Slade, and tried to nurse him out of his internal anguishes. Quite a guy, Ben Martin.

Now there was Porlescue, dead —Porlescue, who had or had not been careless. It could be a troublesome thing for Ben.

Gary looked down at his hands. They had a way of trembling when he even thought of going out of the house. They were steady, much to his surprise. Ben had been right! Mike Porlescue had helped him to forget about himself at last.

It had been a strenuous day in the town of Sheridan. The miners had come home so early in the morning, and there had been nothing to do and no place to go but the Red Apple Bar and Grill. A week's earnings were down the drain already for a dozen men. The juke box blared the same handful of tunes over and over until the deserted main street seemed to beat with a kind of insane echo of blaring trumpets.

It was nearly twelve hours since Mike Porlescue had died, and twilight had reduced the unendurable heat. Dr. Terence Maguire sat in a rocking chair on the porch of his little white house, rocking back and forth, and fanning himself with an imitation palm-leaf fan. A glass of iced coffee rested on the porch rail.

Suddenly the doctor stopped rocking and his eyes fastened on a man walking down the street toward his house—a tall thin man in a brown gabardine suit, with dark green glasses shading his eyes.

As he came abreast of the porch Maguire spoke. "Well, Major, this is a pleasant surprise."

Gary Slade stopped and turned his head. "Oh, hello, Doc."

"Come on up and sit down a minute."

"Sure," Gary said. He climbed the steps and took the wicker chair next to Maguire.

"I've been hoping to see you marching along here some day, Major."

"I guess the day just comes, without warning," Gary said. "And it's Major. *Major. Gary* to you, if you

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The juke box blared out from the bar. "You heard about the accident from Ben I suppose," Maguire said. "They've been cutting up over there plenty all day."

"It's like that when a friend gets killed," Gary said. "I know."

"They mourn with drink the death of a man who never took a drink himself," Maguire said, "unless it was a little wine at table."

"Every man has his own way of mourning," Gary said.

"They have a kind of fierce pride in their lustiness," Maguire said, "their strength, their skill."

"And they use it all to pick a few cents' worth of coal a day out of the face of the earth."

"They're miners," Maguire said. "They were born miners. Things may change, but it's all they'll do. Mine coal."

"There are better places than this."

Maguire's mouth twisted in a wry smile. "It was their home," he said. "There are men who won't leave their home. I'm one of them."

Gary was silent a moment. "I've a curiosity to see the men," he said. "I think I'll go across to the Red Apple and take a look around."

"Oh, no! Don't go over there alone," Maguire said. He laughed. "On a day like this a stranger is apt to have a rough time. I'll go with you."

They walked across the street together and into the Red Apple. The air was stale, almost choking. They stood at the bar. Two men sat in the corner, bent over a checkerboard.

"Evans and Thomas, our two Welshmen," Maguire said. "They've played a million games of checkers over the years."

Evans and Thomas were the only quiet elements in the place. Others argued and shouted. At the bar were two huge men who looked enough alike to be twins, standing on either side of a cheap-looking blonde who seemed to enjoy them.

"The Lamar brothers," Maguire said, in a low voice. "Matthew and Luke. There were four of them once. Mark and John were killed in the big S. C. and C. disaster."

Luke Lamar turned away from the girl to speak to a little ferret-faced man who was tugging at his coat sleeve like a small terrier.

"Beat it, Stanley," Luke said. Then he saw Doc Maguire and Gary. His eyes moved appraisingly over Gary.

"Hi, Luke," Doc said. "This is Major Slade, Ben's friend who's been sick up at the house. Big war hero, the major is."

Luke Lamar's eyes continued their appraisal. Gary thought he could read his mind. War hero! Why, he could break such a hero to bits between his thumb and forefinger.

The ferret-faced man got past Luke to the girl. "Don't you think we ought to be going, Louella?" he said, pleading.

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"Don't be a jerk, Stanley. We don't often get a holiday like this."

Luke Lamar put his hand on the little man's shoulder and moved him away. "Beat it, Stanley," he said, and his arm went around the blonde girl.

"Stanley Harris is the shot firer at the mine," Maguire said in Gary's ear. "Girl's his wife. Gives him a pretty rough time, from all accounts."

Stanley turned away from the picture of the Lamar brothers crushing his wife between them, and he saw Doc and Gary. Doc introduced him to Gary.

"I suppose Ben told you what happened," Stanley said. "I still can't figure it. We counted the shots and they all went off. I wouldn't make a mistake about a thing like that. It's life and death, you understand. Every day it's life and death."

He turned away. "Louella, don't you think—?" His voice was drowned in the thunderous laughter of the Lamar brothers over some joke.

Gary turned away. "I've seen it," he said. "I've seen the mourners."

They started out. In the doorway they met a thin elderly man in shirt sleeves held up by elastic garters, with an old straw hat pushed back on his forehead. His eyes were a watery gray.

"Hi, Ed," Maguire said. "This is Major Slade, Ben's friend. This, Gary, is Ed Wingate, proprietor of our local store, judge, sheriff, first selectman, owner of the water company—first citizen of Sheridan."

"Hello, Your Honor," Gary said.

"You've been sick," Wingate said.

"That's right."

"Feeling better now?"

"Thanks—yes."

Wingate nodded as though he was pleased with the answer. "Helping Ben out?" he asked.

"Not exactly. I'm not fit for very much hard labor yet."

"Oh, I didn't mean working at the mine," Wingate said. "Ben's got the idea Mike Porlescue was murdered, I understand. Heard you used to be a cop. Thought you might be working on the case for Ben."

"I was never a cop," Gary said.

"No?"

"Matter of fact that's what I heard, Major," Maguire said cheerfully.

"I was an insurance investigator," Gary said. "That's quite a different thing."

"If Ben has evidence of murder he ought to bring it to me—or to the State Police in Millwood," Wingate said. "Murder's a thing for the law to handle."

"If he gets evidence, I imagine he'll do that," Gary said.

"You tell him I said so," Wingate said. "Not that I hold much with the idea it was murder. We've had accidents belowground before this, eh, Doc? Makes you feel mad somebody was careless. Criminal carelessness, I suppose you could

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call it. But you tell Ben if he gets evidence he should bring it to the proper authorities."

"I'll tell him," Gary said.

"Drop in at the store any time," Wingate said. "Don't see many strangers around here nowadays. Enjoy talking to 'em." And he went on into the Red Apple.

Out on the street Gary turned to Maguire. "Is the Porlescue house down here somewhere?"

"Why—yes. Third house past the intersection."

"I thought I'd pay my respects," Gary said. "There might be something I could do for Mrs. Porlescue. I've got nothing but time on my hands."

"That's a real generous thought," Maguire said. "Don't overdo it the first time out, Major."

"I won't."

As Gary walked down the street he had the feeling Maguire was still standing there, watching him. There was something disturbing about the last fifteen minutes—something about Maguire's cordiality, something about the way Luke Lamar had looked him over, something about Wingate's curiosity. Gary couldn't be sure. In the old days he would have trusted his instinct. He couldn't now. His nerves had been playing tricks on him for so long.

There was a car standing outside the Porlescues' shack which Gary recognized as belonging to Joyce Perry. He hesitated, then went up on the rickety porch and knocked.

It was Joyce who opened the door. She looked surprised and pleased. "Gary! This is wonderful!"

"I was just out for a walk," he said. "I thought there might be something I could do here—to help."

He could see past Joyce into the house. A woman sat at the kitchen table, hugging herself, rocking back and forth. The tragic face could belong only to Mrs. Porlescue.

"Come in," Joyce said. She went over to the widow and put a hand on her shoulder. "This is Mr. Slade, a friend of Mr. Martin's. He wants to help if he can, Mrs. Porlescue."

The woman's lips moved. "Mike made no mistake," she said.

"Mrs. Porlescue thinks somebody killed her husband," Joyce said.

"Why?" Gary asked.

"Mike made no mistake," Mrs. Porlescue said.

"He had enemies?" Gary asked.

The woman didn't answer.

"Did he tell you something, Mrs. Porlescue? Was he perhaps afraid of someone?"

She opened her mouth, closed it, and then said, "Mike made no mistake."

Gary felt a faint prickling sensation at the nape of his neck. He had been here before. A witness who, for some reason, was afraid to talk. Why not? he thought.

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"If there is anything you want to tell me any time," he said, and realized he was mouthing the words as though he was talking to a deaf person, "tell Miss Perry."

"Mike was careful. Mike made no mistake," Mrs. Porlescue said.

Joyce went out onto the porch with Gary.

"Can I get home this way?" he asked.

"Just take the right turn at the intersection," Joyce said. "That's the road that goes right by the farm. It's about a mile. If you'd like me to drive you—?"

"I'd like to walk," he said. "I'd like to think."

She reached out and touched his hand. "She's convinced, Gary. And I think she's afraid to tell something she knows."

"I got the same impression." He took a deep breath. "If I weren't so jumpy I could trust what I feel. See you in the morning?"

"Yes. Of course. Good night, Gary."

"Nice girl," he thought. He walked along to the dusty intersection and turned right. It was dark, except for a blurred moon. Somewhere far away was the distant rumble of thunder. As Ben had said, there was no evidence, nothing to go on. Just a *feel* of something. And Mrs. Porlescue's face, with a curtain of fear over her eyes . . .

He heard the car approaching behind him and moved farther over to the side of the road, still thinking about the widow. The car was coming fast. Then suddenly he realized there was something wrong. It was close, and yet there was no reflection of headlights on the road.

He turned, and felt his heart jam against his ribs. It was only a few yards away, racing straight at him, without lights!

The Army had taught him one thing—not to hesitate. Without trying to pick a spot he hurled himself face down into the brush at the side of the road. The car bumped along, right wheels in the ditch, swerved up onto the road with a squealing of tires, and sped off.

Gary got up slowly, gently feeling to make sure he was all in one piece. He was trembling, and it wasn't from nerves. He was blazing with anger. His green glasses lay broken in the ditch, and he left them there. He started walking briskly toward the farmhouse.

When he got there and let himself in the front door he saw Ben at the telephone.

"Hey!" Ben said. "I was just about to send out an alarm for you. I—Gary! What's happened?"

Gary looked down at his gabardine suit. It was torn in one place, stained by grass and earth. He looked at Ben with a grim smile. "The clincher," he said.

"Clincher?"

"You were right, Ben. Mr. Porlescue wasn't careless. Someone did it to him."

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The next day began like a hundred other days for everyone in Sheridan except Gary Slade. For the first time in three months he got up at five, when Ben did. For the first time he didn't lie in his bed, staring at the ceiling, and waiting for what lay ahead of him.

Anger buoyed him into action. He had been angry before, a long, smoldering anger at Fate. Now he was directly angry with a man who had booby-trapped the quiet Mike Porlescue, who had turned Mrs. Porlescue's face into a tragic mask, and who had, in cold blood, tried to run him down in a roadside ditch.

Ben, who had been half afraid the energy Gary had shown the day before would have drained itself and left him again without interest in anything, was delighted when Gary appeared in the kitchen for breakfast.

"Still coming along with me?"

"You bet," Gary said. "How are the eggs coming? I could eat a horse."

"Any aches and pains from your little adventure?"

"Nothing important."

"I can't figure it," Ben said, as he brought the pan of eggs and ham over to the table and began serving it.

"Neither can I," Gary said. "But I will."

The head frame rose like a strange skeleton in the brown fields as they approached it. Gary had told Ben what he wanted—a picture of the routine—and he walked at Ben's elbow and let him do the talking. As they approached, Ben pointed out the big scale.

"Just what you see at a feed-and-coal place in any town," Ben said. "The empty truck drives on the scale and is weighed. Stanley checks the empty weight in his books there in the scale house. When the truck comes out loaded it's weighed again, and the driver is charged for the grade of coal he's taking out."

They walked on to the washhouse, where Ben would change into his work clothes. As Ben opened the door Gary heard a noise like the rustle of autumn leaves driven by a sudden gust of wind. Then he saw what it was—rats! Dozens of rats scurried across the floor and out of sight.

"That's why we have these pulley hooks for clothes in the center of the room," Ben said. "Got to keep clothes away from the walls and off the floor."

It took him only a minute or two to change into his work clothes and put on his hat with the carbide lamp attached to the peak.

Nearly all the other miners were gathered at the head frame when Gary and Ben arrived. The first person Gary identified was Luke Lamar, flanked by his brother Matt.

"Sightseeing?" Luke asked.

"Something like that," Gary said.

"I can think of a lot of things that are more interestin' than going down in a truck mine," Luke said.

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"Maybe somebody's blonde wife," a voice called out in the gloom. Everybody laughed. Gary looked around for Stanley and realized he was back in the scale house. He'd been spared that.

"Somebody get Mr. Slade a hard hat and a lamp," Ben said.

A steam whistle tooted and the miners began to troop into the hoist cage. Somebody handed Gary a hard hat with a carbide lamp on it.

They got on the hoist and it started down into the black well of the mine. The miners began lighting their lamps and settling their hats on their heads.

The descent was slow, into complete gloom. Gary had imagined passing worked-out corridors on their way down, but Ben explained that they were working the first seam of coal. The big mines eventually go down to the third or fourth seam, hundreds of feet deeper. The voices which had been laughing and joking as they started down were gradually stilled.

When the hoist finally stopped at the bottom of the shaft the men went off quietly to their work areas, fifteen giants disappearing into darkness. The pillar-and-room method of mining, they called it. Each man went into what was literally a separate room to do his day's work. Ben's area was several hundred feet from the shaft.

As they walked into it the light from the lamps showed Gary a small room, the roof held up by pillars of coal and a few timbers which looked almost carelessly placed. As they reached the center, Ben turned to Gary with a silencing gesture. He stood still, his head cocked, as if he were listening for something.

"Okay, I guess," he said finally. "You were listening for what?"

Ben grinned. "Above that ceiling is draw slate. If you hear it tinkling you can figure there's going to be a cave-in and you get out—fast! You listen when you first come down, because the blasting of the day before may have shaken something loose."

Ben squatted down so that the light from his lamp focused on the black wall that faced them. "That's the seam of coal," he said. "It's about four and a half feet high. All this stuff in front of it is what was blown off by the last shot. My day's work begins with breaking that up, loading on that little car there, and wheeling it out to the hoist. When it's all cleared away I've earned my day's pay and I start drilling for tomorrow."

"All these guys do their own drilling?"

"Yep—with a hand drill."

"What went wrong with Porlescue? You said something about the shot rifling."

"Look," Ben said. "For tomorrow I drill my hole here at the left end of the face. Then I go over to the other end and pick away around the edge. That's so that when the shot fires, the coal has a chance to break

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out." Ben stood up. "If you drop a plate on the floor, when it breaks, the pieces spread out in a wider area than the original size of the plate. Right?"

"Right."

"It's like an explosion, and the pieces break out from the center. If you dropped that plate down a tube just the size of the plate, the pieces would bounce straight back up at you, because there'd be no way for them to break outward."

"I see."

"So we pick around the edge of the face so that there's room for it to break outward. If we don't, it puts too big a burden on the shot and it rifles straight out at you. It makes for a big explosion instead of just a crumbling away of the face. Whoever loaded that extra hole in Porlescue's room didn't allow for it to do anything but explode. Porlescue didn't have a chance."

"Nice gentle gimmick," Gary said.

"It's a lucky thing it didn't blow the whole mine up. If it had happened when the other shots went off it would have. The mine would have been full of dust and the explosion would have blown the works."

"Isn't there danger of that happening every day, then?"

Ben grinned. "The boys don't make mistakes in their drilling. Now, get out of here, Bub, and let me get to work or I won't earn my keep."

All day long the little cars of coal came up on the hoist, were wheeled over to the chutes, and dumped onto the shaker screen. The screen sifted the big hunks into one bin, the two-inch into another, and the fine into a third. The trucks backed up and loaded the grade they wanted, drove off to the scale for the weigh-out, and carried their load to the market.

About two thirty the miners all came aboveground. Ben spotted Gary and beckoned him over to the magazine, a small shed about a hundred yards from the head frame. There Ben doled out powder and fuse to the miners, marking down the amount in a book. Gary watched the men make their charges, just as Ben had described—the piece of broomstick, the pages from a magazine, the powder.

As they finally made their way back to the hoist Gary heard Matt Lamar speak to Ben. "Luke's sick," he said. "Little too much high jinks yesterday, I guess. He's gone home. I said I'd load his shot for him. Okay?"

"Okay," Ben said. "Where's Stanley?"

Stanley was shouted for. He wasn't in the scale house. A slow smile spread over Matt Lamar's face. "The little jerk," he said.

"You know where he is?" Ben asked.

"I can guess. He probably saw Luke going off and thought he was headed for Louella."

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Ben's face hardened. "Was he?"

"No!" Matt said. "I told you—he's sick."

"Somebody go down to Stanley's house and get him," Ben ordered.

"I'll go," McBane said, and he started off toward town.

"Put out that cigarette, mister," somebody said at Gary's elbow.

"Sorry." Gary dropped the cigarette and stepped on it. For some reason the old internal tensions were gnawing at his insides. Maybe he had overdone it.

They stood there, sweating in the grueling heat, waiting for McBane. It was half an hour before he came puffing back.

"Nobody home," he reported. "Not Stanley. Not Louella."

"So now what?" a voice said. "No shot firer. There goes tomorrow's pay."

"I'll fire the shots for you," Ben said. "Only, you'll have to give me a little more fuse than you give Stanley."

"How much you want, Ben?"

"Five feet," Ben said.

"Five feet!" There was a rumble of discontent.

"Five feet or no shot," Ben said. "I don't know my way around the way Stanley does."

Grumbling, the men went off to the hoist. Ben came over to where Gary stood. "Imagine that little crumb running off after his woman at this point."

"What's this about fuse?" Gary asked.

Ben pushed his hat back on his head and wiped his face with the grubby sleeve of his shirt. "This is a pretty haphazard business—all but the blasting," he said. "We use black powder fuse, and it's manufactured under control and with great accuracy. It burns at one foot every forty seconds. It has to be exact because lives depend on it."

"So?"

"Stanley's an old hand," Ben said. "They give him three feet of fuse. He goes down, lights sixteen fuses, and gets as far back along the haulage way as he can He has to do the whole job and be in a safe place near the cage before the first fuse burns out—three feet, two minutes."

"Two minutes!"

"It's plenty of time when you know your way around. I need a little more time, just to be sure."

"Five feet—" Gary was doing mathematics in his head.

"Three minutes and twenty seconds. I could do it and walk up the escape ladder in that time."

Gary tried to picture it: the sixteen working areas, the sixteen fuse ends, Ben hurrying from fuse to fuse with his carbide lamp. Suppose he was too slow?

Then he laughed. Of course, you'd time yourself from the first fuse. If you weren't going to make them all, you'd just get to safety without finishing. All you had to do was time yourself from the moment you lit the first fuse.

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"Why the gripe about the five feet?" he asked.

Ben chuckled. "They have to pay for their own fuse. It'll cost them a few cents more."

"I hope the second hand on your watch works," Gary said dryly.

"And it's luminous!" Ben said.

It was half an hour before the men came to the surface again.

Matt Lamar was first off the hoist. "It's all yours, Ben. Take it away."

"Five feet?" Ben asked. "You guys didn't cheat on me?"

"You can take down a tape measure if you want," McBane said.

"Okay," Ben said, and started for the hoist. "If Stanley shows, hang him up on one of the hooks in the washhouse. I want to talk to him." He winked at Gary. "See you presently, Major."

The hoist started down and Ben disappeared, foot by foot, until he was out of sight.

Gary glanced at his watch—a minute to get down, three minutes and twenty seconds before the first shot would go off. By then Ben would be safe in the haulage way.

A minute and twenty seconds had passed.

A minute and forty seconds.

Ben had probably got three or four of the fuses lit by now.

Two minutes—in another thirty or forty seconds he should be started back to safety.

The explosion was louder, much louder, than Gary had expected. Maybe he hadn't understood rightly. He glanced around. Everyone seemed frozen.

"It rifled!" somebody whispered.

"If it's the first one, it's yours, McBane!" Matt Lamar said.

"It's just two minutes!" Gary said. "If there was five feet of fuse —"

No one answered him. He started toward the hoist. Someone grabbed him from behind and pulled him back. "Stay away from there!" Matt Lamar said.

Gary tried to wrestle himself free. Then the second shot went off, and the third.

"She's blowing!" somebody shouted.

Gary felt himself dragged back by Lamar, helplessly. The earth rocked under his feet. He saw Teliski, the hoist operator, running toward them. "The cage is jammed at the bottom! Cave-in!"

The head frame rocked, tilted to one side, and swayed there dizzily. Out of the shaft came dense black smoke and flame, and the rumbling sound of an angry volcano, and more explosion. The heat was insufferable.

Gary, frozen, was carried bodily by Matt Lamar, who was swearing under his breath. Another explosion, and more smoke and fire belched out of the earth.

Then there was silence, except for the breathing of the men. Slowly the smoke cleared, and there was nothing but silence, and a copper-

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red sun trying to shine its way through the dust.

Gary was the first one to speak. "How do we get him out?" he asked.

"Are you crazy?" Matt Lamar growled. "We don't. Not now. Not ever."

Maguire came, and Joyce Perry came, but Matt Lamar was right. There was no need for a doctor or a nurse. Now now—not ever.

"Just one of those things," voices kept saying.

Gary could feel nothing but ice in his veins. Shock seemed to have removed all sense of feeling. But his mind raced over the details. To these others the explosion meant the end of a way of making a living. The mine was gone. They would have to move. They would have to try somewhere else. Weeks without work—and there had never been any savings.

To Gary it meant simply that Ben was dead; Ben, whom he loved.

Joyce had the sense, the tact, to realize there was nothing she could say to Gary.

Maguire was not so delicate. He came up beside Gary and put his hand on Gary's shoulder. "A tragedy," he said. "But it happens. Occupational hazard, you might call it."

Gary turned on him. "Occupational hazard? Since when has murder been an occupational hazard?"

Doc Maguire's eyebrows rose. "Murder? What are you talking about, son?" Voices around them were silenced.

"I'll tell you," Gary said quietly. "That first shot went off exactly two minutes from the time Ben stepped on the hoist *up here* to go down. You can tell me how long it takes to get down. Forty seconds? A minute? So, a minute later—a minute and twenty seconds at the latest—that shot went off. How?"

"You're off your nut, mister," Matt Lamar said. "It couldn't have. There was five feet of fuse. It would take—"

"I timed it," Gary said grimly.

"I guess you just made a mistake, son, in the excitement," Maguire said gently. "I know how you felt about Ben—how we all felt about him."

"Not all," Gary said. "Get this: If he lit the first fuse the instant he stepped off the hoist, and if you figure it generously, there wasn't more than a minute and twenty seconds for the fuse to burn. That would be two feet of fuse, right? Wouldn't he have seen that? He'd know how close it was to the face, wouldn't he? He could tell whether it was two feet or five feet, couldn't he?"

Maguire looked at him gravely. "I know the state of your nerves, son. This must have been an unholy shock for you. Of course, he could tell the difference between two feet of fuse and five. The thing is, you

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slipped up on your timing somehow."

"I never took my eyes off my watch," Gary said.

"Why were you so interested in timing it, son?"

Gary made an impatient gesture. "It doesn't matter, does it? I *was* interested and I *did* time it. That's what's important. That first shot went off in just over a minute, figuring he lighted the fuse the instant he got to the bottom of the shaft."

"And he wouldn't do that," a voice said in the crowd. "He'd take a minute or so to check the whole layout over. That's what Stanley does—and he does it every day. Ben would have been even more careful." It was McBane.

"Well, it was the shot in your room that went wrong," Matt Lamar said. "How do you account for that, Mac? He'd have lighted yours first."

"Why?" Gary asked.

"Because my room is farthest from the hoist," McBane said. "But we don't know, Matt, and we never will know if that's where the first explosion came from."

"You're right," Lamar said. He looked at Gary. "I know how you feel, mister—as though there was something we ought to be able to do. But even if there was something haywire down there, we'll never know what it was."

Again Maguire touched Gary's shoulder. "My advice to you, son, is to go home and get some rest. I'll prescribe a sedative and get Miss Perry to bring it up for you."

Gary pulled away from the doctor's touch. For a moment the coldness left him and he felt his heart choking up into his throat. "You're just going to let him stay down there?"

Maguire shrugged. "You know something we can do, son?"

Gary looked at Maguire, and the moment of emotion passed and he was cold again. "I know what I'm going to do," he said. "Get in touch with your friend Wingate and report a murder."

(*continued on page* 99)

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HONORABLE MENTION

in the CWA contest

GUY CULLINGFORD

A strong emotional situation: six-year-old Jamie Broome's mother had been brutally murdered with little Jamie as eyewitness, and Jamie himself had almost been battered to death. Now the boy was in a coma and they were waiting and hoping that he'd regain consciousness and name the murderer. So sit in the hospital room, with the nurse, the boy's father, and Sergeant Gregg, and join their tragic vigil . . .

LOCALS SHOULD KNOW BEST

by GUY CULLINGFORD

THE SMALL HOSPITAL, IN THE small hours, was far less mute and motionless than its star patient, the small boy with the cracked skull. With its lights lowered, the hospital gave the impression of a rather old-fashioned liner still on course, speed diminished, crew at half strength, while the passengers slumbered, if not all of them soundly.

Inside the room at the end of one of those corridors smelling of hospital and nothing else, student nurse Pamela Scott, with an air of efficiency which belied her true feelings, attended to her duties. The presence of the two men, though they sat against the farthest wall, made her increasingly nervous. She was in her second year, but when left to her own devices, and especially at night, responsibility weighed heavily on her.

With the boy so ill and Sister likely to pounce at any moment, she felt that all the fates were willing her to make a botch of it. After all, she was only 19, a tender age to face up to the realities of raised intercranial pressure, even if she was ready to talk glibly on the subject to anyone who would listen and who knew less about it than she did.

She turned the boy from lying on his back onto his side, while keeping an anxious watch on the unpillowed head. Under the pale, carroty hair, the scalp wound was dressed but unbandaged, the face pinched but peaceful.

She studied the waxy lowered lids closely until she was nearly de-

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ceived into thinking she saw the lashes begin to lift. She was terrified of missing any sign of change. She tested the hand grips and checked the pulse. Then she wrote up the neurological chart at the head of the bed. The intravenous needle and tube were behaving as they should and required no regulating.

So far, so good.

Breathing an inward sigh of relief, Pamela seated herself primly to wait out those five blessed minutes which were her own before the routine would begin all over again. Her gaze wandered, as if almost unwillingly, to the two men sharing her vigil—the boy's father and a police sergeant. She knew that all sensible nurses should get down to nursing the patients in their care as best they could without brooding over whether they're likely to die or what will happen to them afterward if they recover.

But Pam was young and Pam was local. It was impossible for her to forget that this poor scrap of humanity entrusted to her had seen his mother battered to death and only narrowly escaped the same fate himself. Why, Meg's own mother and father, old Mr. and Mrs. Fox, lived on the same street as Pam's parents, and though they were always going on about their daughter, this must have come as an awful shock to them. Meg didn't visit her parents much, and Pam only remembered seeing her once, round Christmas, pretty in a sluttish way and very much tarted up for the trip into town.

As for the police sergeant, in private life she knew him as Uncle Dick, simply through his long association with her family, for he wasn't a blood relation. As he was now officially on duty he hadn't even greeted her, if you could discount the ghost of a wink. But if there had to be a policeman in the room she was glad it was him, looking solid and reliable, and utterly unflappable. Especially since no one was absolutely certain that David Broome, the boy's father, hadn't murdered his wife in a fit of provocation. A murderer? Imagine, sitting there within grabbing distance of her!

Nurse Scott repressed a sudden unprofessional shudder, reminding herself that Broome was here as the child's father and not in any other capacity. Or was he?

How did you set about finding out from a child just out of coma who had attacked him, and why? He might not know, or there might be brain damage. And wouldn't bringing it all back to him be likely to cause a relapse? If so, would she do the right thing at exactly the right moment?

This wasn't the first time that Uncle Dick had visited the hospital to wait at a bedside for someone to regain consciousness. It had happened before with a hit-and-run victim, but that was in a public ward with screens round. Why had

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Matron put Jamie Broome into a private room at 30 guineas a week, if it was only for ordinary questioning? Who was going to pay for it?

Not his father on his little bit of money. That had always been Meg's grouse, according to Mrs. Fox. They were constantly so hard up. They had the cottage rent free but the Colonel was an old Scrooge and paid his gamekeeper only the minimum wage—not much more than an ordinary farm laborer. Yet David Broome was a first-rate chap, none better at his work—so Uncle Dick always said and he'd known him for years.

Broome was a good-looker, too. Rather stern and sad—but no wonder with his wife dead and his only son on the danger list! And what a funny, old-fashioned suit he had on—he'd only look right in the country stuff he usually wore. She could imagine him in cords and leggings, lean and sort of lithe, just the type she could go for, provided he wasn't a murderer. And she wouldn't mind taking on the little boy—she loved children.

With a guilty start Nurse Scott pulled herself together. Alone on duty with her mind only half on her work! She knew that the portable x-ray had disclosed only a simple fracture, otherwise the boy would have been whipped off for surgery and the intensive care unit. But who could be sure with children in shock? She had a strong, irrational conviction that only constant watching kept the very sick earthbound and she felt that she must have had a narrow escape from losing her charge altogether while her thoughts had strayed to his father.

She gave a hasty glance at the electric clock on the white wall as it silently sliced off the minutes, then got up from her chair, smoothing down her apron . . .

Though David Broome might appear to the youthful Pamela as stern and sad, it was his habitual expression—or lack of expression—and owed nothing to the ravages of grief. He had a closed, secret face that gave nothing away. Sitting here motionless on a hard seat imposed no strain on him: he was accustomed and trained as part of his calling to accept long waits in uncomfortable positions. And "calling" was the right word for it—for nothing else could have made a gamekeeper of him, with its small rewards and never-ending labors.

If he were out of doors he wouldn't have this feeling of being unable to breathe; the central heating bothered him—he was used to the cool, damp air of the woods, or, at most, the log fire in the cottage. And the hospital noises, muffled though they were, struck strangely on his acute hearing. He couldn't put a name to any of them and this complete lack of identification irritated a man who could recognize every sound in his own environment.

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Even with little Jamie lying there as a constant reminder, Broome fought hard to hold back the torrent of recollection which he knew must ultimately overwhelm him; instead he forced his mind to dwell on the immediate problems on the fringe of the tragedy. Who, for instance, was going to feed the pheasant chicks still in the rearing field? He had no assistant and there wasn't anyone in the village who knew any more about pheasants than how to poach them when they were fully grown.

He'd got Sergeant Gregg to phone the Colonel and explain how things stood, and according to Gregg, the Colonel had blown his top, but what good would that do? What was needed was a stand-in to take over at once. And where would you find one with every keeper in the neighborhood fully extended in his own stretch of the woods at the busiest time of the year, having to keep an eye on his wild nests as well as nursing along his poults? Unless it was done, and done quickly, all the hard and unremitting work of the winter and spring would go for nothing and there wouldn't be a shoot worthy of the name this coming season.

The house doctor, with Sister in tow, broke in on his meditations. The doctor strode over to the bed to read the chart while Sister had a word with the nurse, of which Broome caught only a fragment repeated as question and affirmation.

"No change?"

"No change."

With a sidelong curious glance at the two men in waiting, the doctor departed. Before hurrying in his wake, Sister paused to ask Gregg if there was anything they wanted—a cup of tea, perhaps?

Gregg was just about to say yes when Broome answered for him with a determined, "No, thanks." Sister vanished and Gregg cursed him silently. Visions of steaming cups of tea swam before his weary eyes; cups of strong tea with four heaped spoonsful of sugar. Nurse Scott saw the vision too. She wetted her dry lips with her tongue.

But Broome saw nothing but the shambles in his cottage. Now he could hold off the horrors of the day no longer and as if the self-imposed delay was determined to exact its full revenge by not letting him off one single episode, it had to start with his first waking thought.

Jamie's birthday! Six today. Big boy Jamie. And Meg's head beside him on the pillow, tousled and tinted and looking as if it would have been all the better for a good wash in soft water from the butt outside. She hadn't even cleaned off yesterday's make-up. Traces of it still lingered round her mouth and in the creases of her skin.

He could study her dispassionately because it was a long time since he had wanted her. Such things put him off. But Geoff Martin fancied himself as an artist, so

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perhaps he didn't look at it in the same way. Maybe with what Martin had at home it was a real relief to come to someone like Meg who was everything his own womenfolk were not. Did they honestly think that a born woodsman would miss traces of the regular visits of—of vermin?

Broome could have told what was going on simply from Meg's improved temper and her silly lies. Then, as if anxious to prove his identity, the silly beggar had to leave behind a sketchbook with his name scrawled across one corner. Sheer carelessness? Or was he getting bolder? Well, let it go. And let her go too if that was what she wanted. Her ceaseless moan about the cottage and its loneliness made him nervy.

Yes, let her go, and he and Jamie would carry on together and never feel the loss. Now that Jamie was at school all day, they could manage for themselves. And on holidays he could take the boy into the woods with him, and teach him all he knew, bit by bit, until Jamie was as keen as he was, and they were both daft together. He'd had the same idea about Meg once when she was still behind the bar of The Wild Duck, but it just hadn't worked out. Never mind, he had Jamie, and Jamie might look like his mother but he didn't act like her. Or even like her much; she was too ready with her slaps.

Yes, Jamie was like Meg. And he had never looked more like her than when he stood at the bedroom door with big eyes and a mouth trembling with excitement.

"It's my birthday. My birthday's come. I'm six today. Where is it?"

"Shush. Your Mum's asleep. You don't really expect to get a tricycle, do you? That's a rich kid's toy."

"You said—you said—"

"Oh, well, let's go downstairs and look. Quiet, now."

He had slipped out of bed and just as they were, in their night things, he and Jamie had gone creeping down the steep cottage stairs and into the living room, and there it was, unwrapped and ready to ride off, the brand-new tricycle, in chrome and red enamel.

"Chucking away money like that," Meg had grumbled, "and me needing all sorts of things." But it had been worth it to see Jamie's face. He looked as if he'd just entered the promised land.

Without saying a word, the boy had climbed onto it and sat there on the seat, holding the handlebars in a tight clutch, and his expression was thanks enough. Nearly a week's pay gone phut, but the money had been well spent.

"Where will I ride it?"

"In the yard at first and then in the clearing."

"Now?"

"No, get dressed first."

"Dad, come back to dinner. I'll be able to ride it proper by then, You'll see. Mum's got steak and kidney.

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What luck my birthday being on a Saturday!"

"Jamie, you know I'm in the far woods. I never get back at mid-day now. It'll be bread and cheese for me. See you this evening."

"Oh, blow! Are you taking Scamp?"

Scamp was the labrador he was training for the Colonel.

"No. With the young birds about he's more bother than he's worth."

"Good. Then I'll see to him. Mum won't have him in. She says he stinks."

He wanted to tell Jamie that honest dog smell was better than that of stale perfume, but he held back. He never put Jamie against Meg because she was his mother.

After breakfast, with a wave to Jamie who was straddling his tricycle at the cottage door, Broome had gone striding down the ride with his snack in his shooting bag, feeling as if he, and not the Colonel, owned the woods. Work in the open seemed less like work to him than a deep satisfaction, however tedious it might be. It had been a rainy spring and growth was staggering. He hacked away, clearing the undergrowth, widening the rides. Everything had to be in shipshape order for autumn and the shooting parties.

Even as he severed brambles and cut back the too exuberant saplings, he thought he had never seen the living green more beautiful. He kept a sharp lookout for any signs of marauders, either on the ground or in the air. Vermin bred faster than game birds and had to be sought out and destroyed, without pity and without malice either. Today, out of his own happiness, he had the odd thought that even a stoat or a weasel might take pleasure in its young. What he liked best to see was a covey of partridges; now *there* were good parents for you. Different from pheasants...

When he looked at his watch it was nearly twelve and suddenly he decided to go back to the cottage after all. Just this once. For Jamie. He wiped his face free of sweat and set off on the return trip at his usual easy lope, the ground under his boots soft and springy to his feet.

The cottage door was open, but there was no Jamie to be seen. He went on in. There was Jamie by the table.

If Jamie died—if his brain was damaged...

Sergeant Gregg shifted his position uneasily. He was getting a cramp and he wanted to be sure of being able to move quickly in any emergency. I'm too old for this sort of lark, he thought ruefully, and he wished he'd been safely retired and cultivating his garden before this ghastly thing had happened. And what sort of emergency did he expect? It was his head he'd have to use and not his legs when the child came to—if he did.

Sergeant Gregg accused himself of being a real old woman. It

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would be better if he took a leaf out of young Pam's book. There she sat as cool as a cucumber when she wasn't busy with her nursing and, by God, he would never have thought there'd be so much to do for a kid who was flat out. But Pam hadn't seen what he'd seen; just after he'd eaten too. Whether Gregg was off duty or not, it was natural for Broome to come running to the nearest place for help when he wanted the law. And then, them being friends—no, Broome had no real friends; he was too reserved and shy, though once he began to talk about his boy and his work, in that order, there was no stopping him.

"How's young Jamie?" Gregg had asked him when last they met, before this terrible business.

"Fine. He'll be six this Saturday. I've bought him a trike. He's crazy for it."

"You're the crazy one to fork out. Tell you what. I'll get him a book. That's more my price."

"No good. He can't read or write."

"Never mind. It'll keep till he can."

But now, how long might they have to keep it?

Broome had gone all to pieces and Gregg hadn't been much steadier himself. They both had to have a drink of water from the tap before he came to his senses and sent Broome off to the phone box while he stayed behind to keep guard on the boy—and the remains. The dog was whining, tied up in the yard, and it wasn't exactly a cheering thought that the murderer might still be somewhere around. For at that time it had never entered his head that Broome might have been involved himself. If so, would Gregg have let him out of his sight?

He didn't attempt to move Jamie—he knew better than that. All the same, it seemed hours before Doctor Jessup and the ambulance arrived and then they had to wait for the Super to get there to permit the removal. Poor little devil, here he was now with everything being done for him that could be, and please God, he'd pull through with no lasting damage. Though with what he must have seen—and no more Mum—and perhaps no more Dad either—

No, damn it, it couldn't have been like that because, however you looked at it, it was beyond reason to believe that Broome would have maimed his own son. Beyond reason, repeated the sergeant to himself uneasily, wondering if he had something there. No, Broome was as sane as they come. The only way he was cranky was in the way he idolized the boy and that was hardly consistent with bashing him over the head. Anyway Broome was a gentle chap who wouldn't hurt a fly.

As if in immediate contradiction of this assumption, the sergeant saw before his eyes a string of small slaughtered creatures suspended near the gamekeeper's cottage, either as a tally or a warning to the

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others. But that was different, that was a part of the man's work. These vermin had been shot or trapped, not brained with a poker out of the hearth.

Then it had to be a tramp or a sneak thief. But the dog was tied in the back yard and tramps don't go where they hear dogs. And what would a sneak thief be after in a cottage like that where there was obviously nothing of value, not even a telly and only an old radio that might have come out of the Ark?

The sergeant lifted his large clasped hands a half inch away from his stomach. They were beginning to weigh heavy on it. Here he sat, his sleeve brushing Broome's, and if the gamekeeper had been responsible for that—that massacre, wouldn't Gregg somehow feel it sitting up so close? Frenzy, that's what it had been, plain frenzy, hit and hit again, and if Jamie only had the one blow he must have dodged or been uncommonly lucky.

Now if it had been Meg alone who'd been attacked . . . Meg was a slut and always had been, and it was common talk that Geoff Martin was keeping her company while Broome was busy in the far woods. Everyone knew it, including, some said, the husband. Geoff was a neurotic, thought the sergeant, pleased with the word. And no wonder, with his mother and his wife everlastingly competing for possession of him—meaning nothing nasty, for they were both as sexless as mules.

An artist Geoff called himself, and they were always having his work framed. Goodness knows no one else would want it. Geoff was the ideal suspect if Doctor Jessup hadn't come straight from him to the cottage. At the time of the crime that hero was in bed with a high temperature and with the two she-dragons one at each side of his bed.

Well, it's not my worry, decided the sergeant. Or the Super's either.

"I'm calling in Scotland Yard," the old man had said. "We haven't the men or the equipment." It wasn't only that. "Colonel Mayne's been on the phone," he went on. "Says Broome's the best gamekeeper in the county and we're mad if we think he had anything to do with it. As if that signified. Let the London chaps sort it out. In the meantime you stick closer to Broome than if you were his brother. I don't care if the Chief Constable does shoot over Mayne's land. Sounded as if he expected me to detail one of my force to take over his ruddy fowls."

Recollection caused the sergeant's lips to twitch; there was a lighter side even to this. So the London chaps were probably already en route, hitting it up on the motorway with all expenses paid. Leave it to them. And yet—and yet—

Locals should know their own business best, even if it's a bloody one. Meg was attacked and the boy had witnessed it. Broome would never harm his son, not even to save his own skin. Therefore, Broome

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could not have attacked Meg. Clear enough, you'd think. Broome had come home on a whim, as he maintained (and there was his cheese snack still in a paper bag to confirm it), simply to please the boy on his birthday; and he had discovered the two of them, Meg dead and the boy unconscious.

But there was the time factor. The postman had seen both Meg and Jamie alive when he came up at twelve o'clock with the parcels, also for Jamie's birthday. He'd had to leave his truck by the side of the road and walk up to the cottage in the clearing, and coming or going he'd seen no sign of an intruder. Just Meg and the boy, and the lad dancing with excitement at the idea of unwrapping his birthday presents.

And suddenly Gregg was back in the cottage himself as if bodily transported. He was once again facing that interminable wait for reinforcements while his sickened mind sought about for some distraction from the sight of spattered blood and the two recumbent bodies. Mustn't touch anything because of fingerprints, though was it likely?

The poverty of the room struck him afresh. Just a few sticks of furniture and only Broome's shotguns on the wall kept in good condition. What on earth had tempted Meg to come here in the first place? She must have known that Broome would never move into town; he was a dedicated man. Love? A ring on her finger?

There was a cloying and horrible smell which he thought had something to do with the crime until he traced it to the meat pie still in the oven. He came back to the living room and his gaze drifted away from the cheap crockery on the scarred dresser until it rested, as he knew it would, on what lay face downward, spreadeagled in front of the hearth, where some half-charred logs were still sluggishly burning in the pale spring sunlight. Poor, worthless Meg!

Morbid curiosity sated, Gregg had turned to the boy who had fallen by the farthest table leg as if he had tried to escape round it for protection. He wondered whether he should take his pulse again but decided against it. He could do nothing to help the lad and he wanted to go on believing he was still alive. Jamie's cheek rested on the rough matting and his delicate profile and the creamy, freckled skin that goes with reddish hair reminded Gregg of Meg when she'd been a child.

For relief his eyes turned to what was on the table top—the clutter of Jamie's birthday gifts lying beside their brown-paper wrappings among the knives and forks already set up for dinner. That abandoned little collection brought a lump to his throat. God in heaven, who would attack a child in the middle of opening his birthday presents?

A mouth organ in a striped box, a gaudy humming top, a box of paints

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—from the grandparents likely enough. Cheap stuff, nothing to compare with the costly trike lording it in the middle of the floor space, in line with the sergeant's feet. A narrow slip of white paper was lying beside it and Gregg, who was long-sighted, read it from where he stood. WITH LOVING GREETINGS FROM YOUR DAD—in block capitals.

The sergeant, sitting beside Broome, waiting with him in a hospital room for the child to recover consciousness, gave an almighty start. Suppose the slip of paper had nothing whatever to do with the trike? Suppose it had come out of, say, the paint box, and, being light, had floated down to the ground when— Then what? The whole picture shifted. If the child spoke—when he spoke—he would still be in danger, not out of it.

All Gregg's underlying disquiet, all his doubts surfaced with a rush. But before he had time to readjust to the situation, what they had been waiting for happened, taking them by surprise. The closed lids lifted and a pair of unfocused eyes stared up at the ceiling. As if ejected from his chair, Broome was on his feet, and Gregg with him.

Two strides took Broome to the bedside, where he looked down at the drawn little face with an intensity which excluded everybody but himself and the boy.

Gregg, with a grip on Broome's arm which wouldn't have disgraced a police dog, relaxed it on hearing the first words. There was no mistaking the tone of naked and unashamed love. "Jamie! Jamie, boy. It's all right. I'm here."

The eyes which had filled with an immediate glad recognition changed almost on the instant to a look of pure horror. Jamie remained perfectly still but words rushed out of him, starting on a high pitch and decreasing to a whisper.

"No, Daddy. No, no, no, *no!*"

After the last no they ceased altogether and the lids sank wearily down.

Nurse Scott was ringing the bell which would summon Sister. She kept on pressing it and pressing it in a way which would bring down retribution on her head before she was much older. Sister came rushing in, followed by the doctor, and as they took over, Gregg and Broome slipped from the room as if by common consent and nobody stopped them.

"That's it, then," said Broome, out in the empty corridor, with its uncurtained windows beginning to show the dawn. "He'll be all right now. You'll have your witness and thank God for it."

"I'm sorry, man—glad for him but sorry for you."

"You guessed, did you?"

"It only just now came to me. I spotted the slip of paper but it took me till then to place it. The shape narrow, you remember. And I knew Jamie couldn't read—you'd told me

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so yourself. It was a cruel trick, a damned cruel trick. And on that day of all days. Perhaps I shouldn't say so but I reckon it was enough to drive a man out of his mind."

"It wasn't a trick, Gregg. It wasn't meant for me to see. If I hadn't gone back, if I hadn't been there to help with the unpacking . . . The message was for Meg to grin at, but the thought was for Jamie. You see, you can't help it when . . . well, it's natural, a sort of pride. You want a boy to like what you like, do as you do. But he must have thought I was a fool. I took it for granted that it was a fresh affair, not a renewal. I should never have struck Jamie. Only the once, Gregg, before I—it wasn't his fault."

"No, it wasn't his fault," agreed the sergeant.

"It's been hell here—waiting."

The sergeant was silent, thinking that's what it will amount to for Broome from now on. Waiting for trial, waiting to know which prison it will be . . . waiting for release. How will he stand it—a man born to the open air? He would have liked to send Broome back alone to his cottage and one of his shotguns, but the sergeant was afraid for his pension.

"Better be getting along to the police station," he said awkwardly.

"Hold your tongue about this, Gregg, keep it to yourself. I'll say Meg and I had a row and I lost my temper. I don't want it all to come out. But I won't have Jamie sent to an orphanage or some such. Tell Geoff from me that he's got to take care of him from now on."

"I'll tell him."

"And tell him there's more to being a father than sending his son a paint box every six years."

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In our March 1968 issue (the 27th Anniversary Issue of EQMM) we offered you the 317th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine—"Letter from Mindoro" by Alan K. Young, introducing Professor Ponsonby, a retired professor of English literature. The story was delightful, and the character of Ponsonby was most appealing— especially since the old professor proved himself an able and erudite code specialist.

Now, code stories are surprisingly rare these days, even with the continuing (if perhaps waning) popularity of spy adventures. So it is doubly delightful to find that Mr. Young has come up with another literary code story, thus turning Professor Ponsonby into a series character. And it is triply delightful to report that Mr. Young is planning more "puzzlers for Ponsonby"—to which we, for two, look forward eagerly!

REFLECTION ON MURDER

by ALAN K. YOUNG

PROFESSOR PONSONBY LOOKED ON APPREHENSIVELY AS CHIEF OF POLICE Decker lowered his 300-odd pounds into the Windsor chair that stood at one side of the professor's study hearth. The chair protested audibly; Ponsonby was about to apologize, thought better of it, and addressed himself to the Chief instead.

"Perhaps you'd be more comfortable in this other chair?"

But Chief Decker had come to terms with the Windsor. He leaned back, slapping his vast stomach in self-congratulatory contentment.

"With an open book upside down on the arm and a half-finished cup of tea there on the table beside it? Now what kind of a detective would I be if I couldn't spot that as your own favorite chair, Professor? No, this'll be fine—if the chair can stand it, so can I. I appreciate your giving me your time."

"My pleasure, sir," replied Ponsonby, resettling himself in his leather armchair. He glanced at the portable tape recorder the Chief had brought with him, wondered uneasily if he were to be subjected to an amateur poetry reading, and hastened to add, "But I'm not at all certain I'm the man you want. On the phone you mentioned something about modern poetry, and since my retirement I haven't been keeping up with the new

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poets. However, there are a number of younger men on the faculty—"

Chief Decker waved one fat hand indifferently, as though fending off a not-very-forbidding mosquito. "I probably shouldn't have referred to this as poetry at all, Professor. All I really meant was that it rhymes. And all I meant by 'modern' was that it doesn't make any sense, at least to me. Not like Longfellow and Kipling and those old boys." From his inside coat pocket the Chief brought out a single sheet of white paper, folded several times across, and handed it to Ponsonby. "It came in the mail on Tuesday morning. That's an exact copy—you'll notice that it's been typed funny, too."

Ponsonby fished his glasses out of his breast pocket, adjusted them on his nose, and began to read:

MALICE IN WONDERLAND

TIME upon a ONCE there WAS,
ZAWOOM! cried the FACE on THE OLD barroom floor,
boop-boop-a-doop SANG the GIRLS in the CHORUS,
blood MUST be let WHEN the wolf's AT THE door!
MOTHER went gimbling with ARMS AKIMBO,
OH WHO can you SEE by the dawn's FRABJOUS light?
biblical PROPHETS are prancing in LIMBO,
TIGERS and elephants DANCE in the NIGHT!
Now if you'd perform a fine feat of detection
You'd best start your search with some careful reflection:
First take 2, 3, 4, 3 and then 3, 3, 3, 2,
And the name of the killer will peer back at you.

"Dear me," said Ponsonby when he had finished his second reading, "this is a bit of a puzzler, isn't it? It's a rather curious blend of traditional meter and rhyme with—well, modern obscurity. But I'm quite certain, Chief, that it's not by any poet with whose work—"

"Oh, I know who wrote it, Professor—that's not the problem. And as a matter of fact I've brought it to you less as our town's most famous literary scholar"—Ponsonby bowed his head, dutifully murmuring a po-

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lite disclaimer—"than as the fellow who did my young nephew Warbow a good turn recently by deciphering a coded letter. Or rather for Marcia Sandborn, the girl he married. Perhaps you remember it?"

"Indeed I do," said Ponsonby, warming to his visitor. "And you think this poem contains a code of some sort?"

"I'm sure of it, Professor, and what's more, if I don't manage to decode it, two of the most vicious young hooligans I've come across in twenty-five years behind the badge are going to get away with murder!"

The fervor with which Chief Decker uttered this declaration set his jowls aquiver. Ponsonby hoped that his own wide-eyed "Good heavens!" was equal to the moment.

Apparently it was. "You can say that again!" responded the Chief. "I take it you've heard of the Varden case?"

"The twins who murdered—or rather, *one* of whom murdered their uncle? Yes, I have."

"You were right the first time, Professor. There's not a doubt in the world but that those boys collaborated in the crime."

"Collaborated?" Ponsonby's voice and eyebrows rose together. "But I gathered from the newspapers that all the evidence points to only *one* twin being guilty. In fact, hasn't it been established that one of them was out of town that night, and don't they both claim to have been that one? Surely I read that they've even come to blows over it in public."

Chief Decker snorted. "Play-acting, Professor, putting on a show to fool the public and a jury, too, if it should come to that. But I know those boys, Professor—for twenty years Thomas and Barnaby Varden have given this town nothing but trouble, laughing at the law, sneering at society, indulging every selfish, perverted whim they ever had. And I don't mean boyish mischief, either—I mean deliberate cruelty to younger children, torturing animals, and destroying private property just for the sheer malicious joy of it. And always with a cleverness that made it impossible for me to prove anything against them—looking me right in the eye with that cocksure grin of theirs, denying everything, and getting their biggest kick out of knowing that I *knew* they were guilty but couldn't do a thing about it.

"Which is exactly what they're doing now, you see, by sending me that poem. They know I'm wise to them, but they think that, far from proving them both guilty, I won't even be able to figure out which one did the actual killing; so they're taunting me with his name, dangling it before me in that silly poem like a—like a—" The Chief's passion sputtered into temporary speechlessness; his fat red face was beaded with perspiration.

Ponsonby had a brief, unnerving vision of his own spindly 130-pound

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form trying to manhandle a prostrate Chief Decker onto the couch. "But are you certain the Varden twins sent it to you? Mightn't some crackpot—?"

"No, Professor, it's even got their fingerprints on it, that's how sure of themselves they are. I had the devil's own time proving it *was* both their fingerprints—finally had to get in an expert from the FBI because, did you know, twins' fingerprints are remarkably alike? Not completely so, mind you, but awfully close. Only in this case, at least, they're reversed, if you follow me——the prints on Tom's right hand are similar to those on Barnaby's left, and vice versa."

"But to collaborate in planning a murder and then send you the name of the one who did the killing hidden in a poem! It seems like such an appalling risk! And for what? What do they have to gain?"

Chief Decker dismissed Ponsonby's doubts with another wave of his hand. "*What* risk? Even if I do decipher it—and of course they're betting I won't—it'll hardly constitute evidence of guilt against whichever one it names. And as for what they have to gain—why nothing but the pure unadulterated pleasure of baiting a poor fat old policeman who's ridden herd on them for most of their good-for-nothing lives. I'm telling you, Professor, two more arrogant, vicious, self-centered—" Chief Decker seemed about to strangle on his own indignation.

Ponsonby stepped forward with a brisk, verbal slap-on-the-back: "Well, I'll certainly do everything I can to help."

"Let me put you in the picture then," said the Chief from behind a large white handkkerchief with which he was mopping his face, "so that you'll understand just what we're up against. Did you know the late Matthew Varden at all?"

"Only to nod to."

"Which is to say just about as well as anyone did. The old boy hardly ever stirred out of that big house of his on Spring Street these past few years. That's where he was murdered, of course, and that's where he'd been born, too, the only child of his father's first marriage. His mother died in 1917 and his father married again and had a daughter, Wilma Varden, late in life; so when his father and stepmother were killed in an automobile accident in 1937, Matthew, by then a forty-year-old bachelor, found himself with a fourteen-year-old half sister to take care of.

"Well, he took care of her all right, trained her to be his housekeeper is about what it amounted to, working the poor child from morning till night, allowing her almost no money to spend out of her share of their father's estate—he was her trustee as well as guardian, of course—hardly ever letting her out of that house. But by golly, somehow little Wilma

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managed to get out anyway, long enough to meet and fall in love with a young soldier stationed out at Camp Medford—that was an infantry training center during the war, you may recall; and one night in 1942, shortly before the boy was to go overseas, she ran off with him.

"A few months later he was killed in the Pacific, and six months after that Wilma died giving birth to twin sons in a one-room apartment over O'Leary's grocery store with only an old midwife for company. Presumably she'd been afraid to approach Matthew to ask for her inheritance—she was still under twenty-one, so ask was all she could've done; and of course without Matthew's consent she hadn't been able to marry the boy, either, so she'd never gotten any dependent's allotment or insurance or anything like that. And Matthew, the old skinflint, had never even tried to find her."

"What a tragic life," murmured Ponsonby.

"Well, the old boy's conscience must have given him a bad time about it," continued the Chief, "because he had himself appointed guardian of his nephews, legally gave them his name, and spent the next twenty years spoiling those kids rotten—giving them everything they wanted, buying their way out of one scrape after another, indulging every selfish whim they had. Then four years ago they turned twenty-one, came into their own inheritance, and went off to see the world. That was in 1963, and since then they've been gallivanting around the world, squandering their inheritance on high living and fancy women.

"But along about the first of this year, as I figure it, they must have got up one morning to find their money almost gone and the prospect of having to go to work for a living staring them right in the face. We may never know which one first thought of murder or how he broached the subject to his brother, but it was inevitable they *would* think of it; after all, they were—spoiled, self-indulgent, unscrupulous, and broke, with just one old man between them and six million dollars.

"At any rate they worked out a plan to murder Uncle Matthew. First of all, last January, they moved back here to Briarwood, took an apartment on Grove Street just around the corner from his house, and started dropping in on him to find out if his habits or those of his household had changed any during the years they'd been away. And they found they hadn't, not in any important respect.

"Matthew Varden's housekeeper, old Mrs. Pringle, still took every Wednesday off to visit her daughter in Middleburg. She invariably left the house as soon as she had cleared away Matthew's dinner on Tuesday evening—that would be about 7:00—and didn't get back until around 9:00 the following evening.

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"God only knows if they tossed a coin or cut cards or how they decided which one would do the actual killing, but knowing them I don't doubt that the one who got to bash in the old man's head considered himself the winner. At any rate they decided to kill him the first Tuesday of last month because of the Monahan-Rodriguez fight that night in Clover City. It had to be done on a Tuesday, you see, so that they would have all day Wednesday to rehearse their story before Mrs. Pringle got back and found the body, and it had to be done on an evening when there was something going on a reasonable distance from Briarwood which was certain to be attended by a number of their acquaintances. And since they'd always more or less run with the local fight crowd, the fights that night in Clover City were made to order.

"A little after 5:00 that afternoon *one* of them left in their jointly owned car to drive the sixty-three miles to Clover City, arriving at the arena there shortly before 7:00. He was there for about three and a half hours, or until 10:27, when Kid Monahan knocked out Caesar Rodriguez to wind up the evening's fight card. Most of that time he stayed put in a ringside seat, but he wandered around some between bouts, and either spoke to or was seen by a dozen people who know the Varden twins. He also appears clearly in a shot of the crowd at ringside which the photographer for the Clover City *Herald* took at exactly 8:33—the arena clock shows up in the background—but that was pure luck, something they could hardly have counted on."

"And really didn't need to prove the presence of one of them at the fights that night," interposed Ponsonby.

"Right. There's no question about it—*one* of them was at the Clover City Arena between 7:00 and 10:30 that evening. And of course they both claim to have been that one, since there's also no question about what the other one was doing. *He* left their Grove Street apartment a few minutes past 8:00—a woman across the street saw him going—and went down the block to Cherry Alley and down the alley to their uncle's backyard. He easily forced the lock on the kitchen door and walked through the kitchen, through the pantry, through the dining room where he picked up a heavy brass candlestick—it was quite cold out that night, so naturally he was wearing gloves—and into the study where Matthew Varden could be found every night at that time going over his investments. The old man's skull was very brittle. It took only one blow to kill him.

"The murderer then turned right around and left the house the same way he had come, going out the back door at approximately 8:25 and running smack into two of the neighbors."

"Ahhh!" said Ponsonby.

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"Ah nuts!" said the Chief. "For anyone else it would have been disastrous, but for the twins it was just one more challenge that tested the ingenuity of their plan. This guy's name is Higgins and his garage faces on Cherry Alley. He and his wife were coming home from a church supper and just as they turned into the alley their headlights fell on one of the twins coming out of Matthew Varden's back door. The couple have known the boys for years and they're positive in their identification, but of course they can't say *which* twin it was. That's not surprising—those boys look so much alike even their closest associates can't always tell which one it is when they meet one of them alone."

Chief Decker paused to mop his face, then resumed his account. "In any event, whichever twin it was went calmly back to their apartment to wait for his brother to get home around midnight. Then for a good part of that night and probably all day Wednesday the one who'd been at the fights must have gone over and over his evening for his brother—everyone he'd seen, everyone he'd talked to, the bouts themselves, anything else he'd noticed going on in the arena, anything unusual about the trip to Clover City and back. And then they must have worked out their respective stories and gone over and over them, and then probably they planned all the mutual accusations they'd be hurling at each other, too, so that everything would be in proper balance. Because that's the key to the whole fiendish plot, don't you see—*balance!* Just enough suspicion of guilt and just enough possibility of innocence on both sides so that no jury will ever be able to say beyond a reasonabble doubt that *this* twin killed Matthew Varden while *that* one was at the fights in Clover City."

"But then why can't you charge them with conspiracy? Your reconstruction of the crime—"

"Ah, but the District Attorney can't just hypothesize the way I'm doing here, Professor. He's got to have evidence to take before a jury, and it'll be a jury that doesn't know those boys as well as I do. So with each one loudly denouncing the other as the murderer—and like as not they've planned to stage a fight right in open court—what chance will the D.A. have of convincing a jury beyond any reasonable doubt that they're in this together?"

"But surely there must be *some* way of establishing which twin actually went to Clover City. These people you say he spoke to—"

"Exactly!" Chief Decker's hands came together with a confirming smack. "That's exactly what I thought the moment I realized they were going to try to squeeze free on a single alibi. So we broadcast an appeal for anyone who'd been at the arena that night to get in touch with the police, and between my office and the State Police and the Clover City boys

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we screened over three thousand people and came up with an even dozen who know the Varden twins and can recall seeing one of them at the Clover City Arena that evening.

"For eight of them it was merely a case of 'Hello there' or 'How are you' with no name being mentioned. A ninth recalls distinctly having said, 'Hi, Tom, how are you?' without being corrected, and a tenth is equally certain that *he* said something like 'Hey Barney, how's the boy?' and not been challenged in *his* identification. And as for the other two—the two who actually did have a few words with one of them—well, just let me play you a few snatches of my interrogation of the twins and I think you'll see clear enough what I'm up against."

Reaching out to the table at his elbow, Chief Decker snapped on the portable tape recorder and a tinny voice suddenly scratched the expectant silence. The Chief listened a moment, pressed a button to send the tape spinning forward through thirty seconds of squeals and squeaks, then listened again. "These were recorded during my second session with each twin," he said above the voice from the tape. "This is from my interrogation of *Thomas* Varden."

He paused, but his voice continued from the tape: "—and you still say that Robert McLane was the only person you talked with that evening other than just to say hello?"

"As far as I can remember, yes." Thomas Varden's voice was a study in boredom.

"What did you talk about?"

"Now really, Decker, I told you all that the other day. As much as I could remember at any rate."

"Well, tell me again."

"We talked about the weather. Doesn't everyone? And we talked about the fights. I seem to recall that Bob actually thought Rodriguez had a chance. And I imagine I told him he was a fool."

"As a matter of fact that's just about how Mr. McLane remembers the conversation. But what would you say, Tom, if I told you that he had been under the impression—the very *strong* impression—that he was talking to *Barnaby* Varden?"

Tom's laugh came tinnily from the tape. "Actually that happens quite often. If I suspect that someone thinks I'm Barney I'll set him straight, of course, but it's embarrassing to go around volunteering 'I'm Tom' to people who appear to know perfectly well who I am."

"I see. And you still maintain that this Mr. McLane was the only person you talked with that evening?"

"Yes."

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"Does the name Willets mean anything to you?"

The sound of a hand slapping knee or forehead came clearly from the tape. "Of course! That slipped my mind completely, but I did have a few words with Jack Willets on the way out of the arena. But now don't go asking me what about! It's a wonder I can remember anything at all about that night, what with everything that's happened since."

"Your brother Barnaby recalled talking to Mr. Willets—recalled it very clearly, as a matter of fact."

"That lousy fink! He pumped me dry that next morning at breakfast about my whole evening. And how was I supposed to know he was going to set up an alibi at my expense? I did wonder why he was so damned curi—"

Tom was cut off in mid-complaint as Chief Decker pressed a button and again sent the tape spinning dizzily forward, stopping it twice to get his bearings and a third time to let it play as he said above his own voice: "And here's part of my second session with *Barnaby* Varden."

"—Willets is quite certain he said, 'Hi, Tom' when he first saw you."

"Well, if he called me Tom"—to Ponsonby's unfamiliar ear Barnaby's voice was indistinguishable from his brother's—"I didn't hear him. And since I didn't hear him, and since Jack Willets knows me as well as he knows Tom, I had no reason to identify myself as Barnaby, now did I?"

"Do you still claim that this conversation with Willets was the only substantial conversation you had with anyone that evening?"

"I do, yes."

"Then you don't recall talking to a Mr. Robert McLane?"

"Well I'll—! Now how the devil could I have forgotten that? Sure I saw Bob there that night, and we had quite a little chat, *too*—about this and that, Rodriguez's chances, mostly."

"So now all of a sudden you remember. Tom recalled his conversation with McLane the first time I questioned him."

"*His* conversation with McLane! Good old Tom!—trying to lie me right into the gas chamber! Well, you'd better not let him get away with it, Decker."

"Oh, come off it, Barney! I know you from 'way back, remember? And as sure as my name's Decker I know you boys are in this together. In my book you're identical bastards, with nothing to choose between you!"

Barnaby's loud laughter pushed rudely into the room. "And that, Sherlock, is *exactly* where you're wrong. Strictly speaking, that is."

Chief Decker angrily snapped off the recorder. "I'll have to apologize for my language, Professor, but those boys get under my skin. But you see what a confoundedly clever plot it is, don't you? They were smart enough

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to realize that no matter how long he rehearsed his story, the killer could never hope to 'remember' as much about what happened that night in Clover City as his brother did. And so the one who really *was* at the fights just as carefully rehearsed the things that *he* intended to *forget*. And of course by having been deliberately vague with everyone he met at the arena that night about *which* twin he was, he'd already prevented any positive eyewitness identification. So they've got me over a barrel, and they know it."

Ponsonby stifled an involuntary gasp at the thought of anyone's attempting to drape Chief Decker's immense rotundity over a barrel. He tried luring the Chief out of his despondency with a deftly cast reminder. "Of course there's still the poem."

The Chief rose unenthusiastically to the bait. "Yes, but a fat lot of good that's going to do me if you can't see more in it than I have. Oh, I've recognized a few surface meanings: that second line, for instance—I once had to arrest Barnaby Varden for being drunk and disorderly in the taproom of the old Chattsforth House, and when I got there he was lying on his back in the middle of the floor making noises like an airplane. And then another time Tom got drunk and invaded the girl's dressing room down at Tanner's Burlesque. That sort of thing.

"But I'm convinced that the surface isn't supposed to mean much, that the real secret lies in those numbers. Only if they *are* a key to the code, they've defied every lock I've tried them in, and I've applied them from the front, from the back, from the bottom, from the top, to the capitalized words only, to the smaller words only, and to all sorts of combinations. I've taken them to be a decoy and gone at the thing without them. I've approached it as a cryptogram, as an anagram, in every way I could think of, but nothing has made any sense.

"And then it occurred to me that maybe you, looking at it as literature, so to speak, might be able to spot something I couldn't. The Varden twins are well read, you see, and I thought there might be—well, literary allusions of some sort, hidden references . . ."

Chief Decker lapsed into silence as Ponsonby applied himself to the poem. For twenty minutes the only sound in the study was the rhythmic ticking of the grandfather clock. Finally Ponsonby muttered, "Primarily dactyls. Not that that tells us anything."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing, Chief—at least, nothing that jumps out at me. As far as its literary classification goes, it would seem to be just nonsense verse. As a matter of fact, they've deliberately linked it in several ways to Lewis Carroll's poem *Jabberwocky*—you know, the one that begins ' 'Twas brillig,

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and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe'?—which is probably the best known of all Victorian nonsense poems. First of all there's the title, obviously based on Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* the book from which *Jabberwocky* comes. And then there's the participle 'gimbling' in the fifth line, which would seem to be based on Carroll's coinage 'gimble'; and the adjective 'frabjous' in the next line is, if I'm not mistaken, a direct borrowing from *Jabberwocky.* But as for a meaning, a clue to some hidden code—" Ponsonby shook his head dejectedly.

Chief Decker sagged in his chair, a veritable mountain of despair. "You don't see any allusions then, not even a passing reference?"

"No, not really. This first line does remind me a bit of E. E. Cummings, although I'd have to think about it a while before I could tell you why. And the second line has overtones of Robert Service, and the sixth, of course, echoes *The Star-Spangled Banner.* And these next two lines bring Blake to mind. But other than that . . ."

Later, of course, Ponsonby would recognize his error, an error especially galling to a retired professor of English literature, especially vexing because it was a point on which accuracy would have led them directly to the code.

Again he shook his head. "No, Chief, I'm afraid I can't offer much help. But even if we could decipher it, how *would* it help you any? Surely whichever twin is named in it will merely insist that it's one more attempt by his brother to incriminate him."

"I don't doubt it, Professor, but knowing positively the identity of the killer would give me something more to work on. Because if there's one thing I'd stake my life on it's that neither of those boys went into this thing intending to take the rap alone if anything went wrong, and that whichever one did the actual killing would never have agreed to do it without first being supplied with some absolute proof of his brother's involvement as a safeguard against a possible double-cross. So if I could arrest the actual killer and get him to wondering if maybe they'd overlooked some vital clue, wondering if maybe he *could* be nailed for this thing after all and *could* wind up rotting in prison while his brother was off somewhere living the life of Reilly on Uncle Matt's millions—well, the chances are good he'd break down and spill the whole thing. But if I arrest the wrong one, the one who really *was* in Clover City that night, it'll be all the proof they need that I'm just floundering and that they've gotten away with murder."

The Chief sighed and wagged his head, setting his jowls to jiggling in unison. "And boy, won't they love that! It'll prove to them that they really are above the law, just a little bit smarter than the rest of us. 'The Brilliant

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Bastards of Briarwood'—that's how they used to bill themselves when they did a little semiprofessional folk singing back in college. They're even proud of their origin, you see, because it sets them apart—"

"*What did you say?*" Ponsonby was sitting bolt upright, staring at the Chief.

The latter was obviously flustered. "Now please don't misunderstand me, Professor, I don't hold it against them that they really *are*—er—illegitimate. Nobody has any control over what his parents did before he was born. No, sir, when I called them bastards—"

"But do you mean to say that they actually are bastards? Born out of wedlock?"

"Well, yes, as I told you. Wilma Varden wasn't old enough to get married without Matthew's consent, and she knew he would never give it. And the young soldier expected to be going overseas in a few weeks and—well, confound it, Professor, can you blame them?"

"Chief Decker, I assure you, my sensibilities have not been offended. But good heavens, man, this could be it! Play me that tape again, quickly, there near the end, just before you turned it off, your interview with Barnaby Varden."

There followed several frantic, fumbling minutes while Chief Decker found the spot on the tape that Ponsonby wanted. Again Barnaby Varden's voice came slamming into the study: "—better not let him get away with it, Decker."

Then it was the Chief speaking: "Oh, come off it, Barney! I know you from 'way back, remember? And as sure as my name's Decker I know you boys are in this together. In my book you're identical bastards, with nothing to choose between you."

Again Barnaby's loud, mocking laughter jarred the room. "And that, Sherlock, is *exactly* where you're wrong. Strictly speaking, that is."

Chief Decker flicked off the tape. Ponsonby was leaning forward now, staring at the poem, his right fist beating an excited tattoo on the arm of his chair. "But of course—of course—by heaven, that is it! The first letters of the first eight lines. I should have seen it before. Your remark about their fingerprints being reversed should have tipped me off. Here—a pencil!"

Ponsonby fished a stub of pencil out of his jacket pocket, placed the poem on top of his book, and began boldly circling the first letters of the first eight lines, muttering to himself as he went down the lines, " 'First take 2, 3, 4, 3 . . . then 3, 3, 3, 2.' "

Chief Decker had lumbered to his feet and stood in front of him, all but kicking the floor in his excitement and frustration. "Confound it, man," he thundered, "let me in on this! What did you find?"

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"I'm sorry, Chief, but my excitement got the better of me. There in your last exchange with Barnaby he was amused by something you'd said, and he was also denying it. Or rather he was denying it 'strictly speaking'—a qualification he scarcely would have added if his denial had been merely for the record. I had assumed that he was denying that he and Tom were bastards—denying that they were actually illegitimate, that is. But if they *are* illegitimate and *know* it and even *boast* of it, then he must have been denying your other assertion. And he was amused, if you'll forgive me, Chief, because the truth had been right there under your nose all the time."

"But *what* other assertion? All I said was that they were—"

"*Identical* bastards! But what, 'strictly speaking,' does the word 'identical' mean?"

The Chief of Police waved an impatient hand. "Exactly alike, I suppose, but—"

"*Exactly* alike, yes. Now there are two kinds of twins—fraternal twins who are derived from separate ova and who resemble each other no more than any two siblings, who can even be of different sexes; and identical twins who are derived from a single ovum. But even so-called identical twins are never *exactly* alike. In other words, 'strictly speaking' they are *not* identical. And very often, as apparently is the case here, the major differences between them stem from the fact that many of their features, sometimes even their internal organs, are reversed. And then they're what's known as—"

"Mirror twins!" In all his years of public service Chief Decker never acted as rudely as he did at that moment, unceremoniously snatching the poem from Ponsonby's hand. "Where? Where?" He was almost shouting in his eagerness.

"In the hall, above the table," said Ponsonby, propelling him out of the study at a speed that belied the Chief's remarkable girth. And Ponsonby had been out of his chair with an agility equally at odds with *his* 77 years.

"And of course you realize," he said as they came into the hall, "that with this lead you should be able to *prove* which twin was in Clover City that night. Because there are at least subtle differences between the right and left sides of every face, and on the twins they'll be reversed. So if you have the face enlarged as much as possible on that ringside photograph you mentioned and then call in an expert physiognomist—"

Ponsonby squeezed up close beside Chief Decker where the latter stood before the hall mirror, holding the poem up to face the glass. They stood side by side, the elephant and the fox, for a long silent moment, digesting the poem's real message, circled by Ponsonby and now reflected in the mirror:

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MALICE IN WONDERLAND

TIME upon a ONCE there WAS.
ZAWOOM! cried the FACE on THE OLD barroom
floor.
Good-boop-a-doop SANG the GIRLS in the CHORUS.
Blood MUST be let WHEN the wolf's AT THE door!
MOTHER went gimbling with ARMS AKIMBO.
OH WHO can you SEE by the dawn's FRABJOUS
light?
Mystical PROPHETS are prancing in LIMBO.
TIGERS and elephants DANCE in the NIGHT!
Now if you'd perform a fine feat of detection
You'd best start your search with some careful
reflection:
First take 2, 3, 4, 3 and then 3, 3, 3, 2,
And the name of the Killer will peer back at
you.

"Well I'll be!" muttered the Chief at last. "And the thing even says to 'start your search with some careful reflection'! So it was right there, staring me in the face the whole time."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Chief," said Ponsonby, venturing a paternal pat on his friend's vast shoulder. "I'm afraid I flunked my assignment, too. By borrowing from Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* the twins included exactly the kind of literary clue you were hoping to get from me—and I missed it! Because of course *Jabberwocky* doesn't come to us from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* at all. It comes to us from Carroll's sequel to that book—from, if you will, *Through the Looking-Glass*."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 323rd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . an unusually spare, taut, grim-featured "first" . . .

The author, Ben Smethurst, is 40 and a native of Miami, Florida. At 17, directly following high school, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy; after a short hitch he went to Bowdoin College from which he was graduated in 1950. He now works for an agency of the Federal government.

Mr. Smethurst is married and has three sons and two daughters. Between Little League games, dancing recitals, and PTA meetings he relaxes with mystery stories. He says he prefers the "old school" type of short story and admits he still finds Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" (despite the carpings of wine connoisseurs) a "tough story to beat for crime based on horror and suspense." He wrote his very first story while he was in the fourth grade of grammar school; it was a "spine-tingling piece about Indians vs. the U. S. Cavalry and entitled 'Black Hawk's Revenge'."

And now his first appearance in print . . .

ALL YOU NEED IS GUTS

by BEN SMETHURST

I SPOTTED THE NEON SIGN THROUGH the driving rain, and it was impulse more than anything—one of those things a guy does without thinking much about what he's doing—that made me turn off the highway and pull up in front of the diner. The parking area was empty.

I switched off the headlights and sat there with the motor running. It was crazy in a way, just a hunch without a plan or anything, but suddenly I knew what I was going to do. I cut the engine, took the revolver from the glove compartment, and put it in the pocket of my windbreaker.

I shook the rain from my hat and walked into the diner. The layout was simple, like a thousand other joints—a counter lined with stools, a few booths, a juke box, a pinball machine. A phone hung on the back wall. The place was hot and stuffy, the air heavy with the smell of fried food. The place was empty, except for the Greek who was busy clearing the counter.

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He glanced up, nodded, finished wiping the counter. I took a stool near the back and lit a cigarette.

The Greek brought water and a menu. He was short and fat, maybe fifty, with stubby fingers and a dirty apron. He was chewing on a toothpick and he needed a shave.

"Just coffee," I said, and he went to get it.

The cash register was on the counter, five stools away. Everything looked right, but I had to be sure. No mistake like that last one. Five years is a long time—five years for one lousy mistake.

I hadn't wanted it that way. Anne needed the operation and we were broke. I tried to borrow the money but my credit was bad. So I took it. I put a gun on the owner of a liquor store and walked out with nearly $600 in cash.

I was picked up less than a block away. There had been a direct alarm hookup to the Police Department.

Anne was in the courtroom the day I was sentenced. She was pale and frightened and coughed continually. That was the last time I saw her. She died a month later. The landlady found her on the kitchen floor of the gas-filled apartment.

Prison was a nightmare—a hellish nightmare of days, weeks, months that slowly dragged into years. I became a loner and shut out the world from my thoughts. But I couldn't shut out the memory of the way Anne looked when they led me away. Her eyes told me I'd failed her when she needed me. Worse, I destroyed her will to live.

I was bitter when I got out—bitter at myself, at everyone, at everything. Good jobs were closed to ex-cons. After a couple of months on construction I quit and drifted from town to town, taking odd jobs, going everywhere, and nowhere.

I'd had enough. I was tired of knocking around. I figured I'd try to hook on with one of the new gambling casinos in the Bahamas. But I needed money. I picked up the gun in a pawnshop for ten bucks. According to the cons, all you need is guts—and the element of surprise. I had both. I had in mind a loan company—until I saw the diner.

I figured the Greek would be good for fifty, maybe seventy-five in cash. Not much, but enough to get me to Miami. Then one more score, a good one, and across the Gulf Stream. Guts and surprise. It would be easy—

"Here y'are." The Greek set the coffee down. "It's a wet night."

"Yeah. Looks like the rain hurt your business."

The Greek shifted the toothpick to the other side of his mouth, shook his head. "It's always slow around this time."

"You open all night?" The coffee was black and strong and hot. I sipped it slowly. Any moment now.

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"Close about midnight, after the night shift comes in from the plant down the road."

The Greek was slicing an apple pie. Out on the highway a car slowed, started to turn in, then sped off into the night and rain. I finished the coffee and crushed the cigarette in the saucer.

I was half off the stool, reaching for the gun, when the door opened and he came into the diner. Just a kid, maybe twenty, slim, with dark hair and sideburns, he walked toward the counter with an easy motion. His black leather jacket was soaked from the rain and drops of water ran down his face, off his chin. He held the gun close to his side, his hand steady. He spoke in a low commanding voice.

"Okay, friend, drop the knife and gimme the dough and nobody'll get hurt." The gun was pointed right at the Greek's belly. The Greek put the knife down. The kid looked over at me. "Sit down, punk." I settled on the stool.

"Come on, hurry up," the kid said to the Greek, motioning toward the cash register with the pistol.

The Greek just stood there and grinned. "First job, kid?" the Greek said.

The kid moved fast. He leaned over the counter and whipped the Greek across the mouth with the gun barrel. The Greek spit out the toothpick and blood oozed from his mouth, fell on the counter. "Help yourself, friend," the Greek said, grinning through split lips.

The kid swore softly, reached across, and opened the cash drawer. He grabbed the bills, started stuffing them in his jacket pocket.

The Greek's hand was a blur as it came up from under the counter. The Greek got off two shots before the kid could change expression. The kid clawed at his chest, slumped against the counter, rolled sideways, collapsed on the floor. He lay still.

The Greek was on the phone asking the operator for the police.

The gun in my pocket felt heavy. I went over and looked down at the kid. The life leaked out of him on the dirty floor of the diner.

I tossed a dime on the counter for the coffee and walked out into the rain.

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The bloodhound-bonbon-and-'tec-tidbit which follows was hilariously performed in April 1948 on the occasion of the Mystery Writers of America's annual Edgar Allan Poe Awards Dinner . . . Now, with great gumshoe gratification, we take you behind the footlights of that prodigious presentation, onto a set worthy of Hollywood in its palmiest days, to watch Dr. Watson played to the hilt by Lawrence G. Blochman (who is built for the part and who enacted the role to a fair-thee-well), and The Mysterious Visitor played to the guilt by John Dickson Carr (who is built for the part and who enacted the role to a scare-thee-well), and last but never least, Sherlock Holmes played to the stilt by Clayton Rawson (who is built for the part and who enacted the role to a dare-thee-well) . . . Happy reading!

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CONK-SINGLETON PAPERS

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

NARRATOR: Crime marches on! . . . A long, thin silhouette emerges against the gaslight. Here is an unpublished record: "In turning over my notes of some twenty years I cannot find any startling event on New Year's Eve except that which is forever associated with the Conk-Singleton Papers. On New Year's Eve of 1887, it is perhaps unnecessary to state, Mr. Sherlock Holmes did not wear a paper hat and blow squeakers at the Hotel Metropole. Far into the night, while the wind howled round our sitting room in 221B Baker Street, Holmes sat bending over a microscope" . . .

At Rise: (*Sherlock Holmes at microscope, Watson immersed in a copy of H. Rider Haggard's "King Solomon's Mines"*)

HOLMES: (*After a moment looks up and stares glassily out at audience*) It is spinach, Watson. Unquestionably, it is spinach!

WATSON: Holmes, you amaze me! What new wizardry is this?

HOLMES: (*Rising*) It means a man's life, Watson. The gardener was lying when he said he found Riccoletti's body in the gooseberry bushes. (*He rubs his hands*) I think, perhaps, a note to our friend Lestrade . . .

WATSON: (*Jumps up*) Holmes! Merciful Heaven. I had forgotten!

HOLMES: Forgotten what?

WATSON: A note for you was de-

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livered by hand this morning. You must forgive me. I was attending the funeral of my last patient.

HOLMES: (*Impatiently*) The letter, Watson! The letter! (*Watson takes note from his pocket, hands it to Holmes, who examines postmark, holds letter up to light, then opens with care and reads*) "There will call upon you tonight, at three o'clock in the morning precisely, a gentleman who desires to consult you about a matter of the deepest moment. Be in your chamber at that hour, and do not take it amiss if the visitor wears a mask."

WATSON: This is indeed a mystery. What can it mean?

HOLMES: These are deep waters, Watson. If Porlock had not warned me about the Scarborough emeralds . . . (*Thoughtfully*) Three o'clock . . .

(*Clock strikes three. Bong! Bong! Bong! Immediately followed by three loud raps on door in same tempo*)

WATSON: And that, if I mistake not, is our client now.

(*Enter visitor dressed in evening clothes but covered with medals—decorations, stars, ribbons, etc.*)

VISITOR: Mr. Sherlock Holmes?

HOLMES: I am Mr. Sherlock Holmes. This is my friend and colleague, Dr. Watson.

VISITOR: You will forgive me, Mr. Holmes, if I do not reveal my identity. I also wear plain evening dress so as not to be conspicuous.

HOLMES: (*Coldly*) You would be better served, my Lord, if Your Lordship removed the mask.

VISITOR: (*Staggering back*) You know me then?

HOLMES: Who could fail to know Lord Cosmo Conk-Singleton, third son of the Duke of Folkstone and private secretary to the Prime Minister?

WATSON: You mean—Mr. Gladstone!

VISITOR: (*Finger at side of nose*) Sssh!

HOLMES: (*Same*) Ssssh!

WATSON: (*Same to audience*) Sssssh!

VISITOR: The matter upon which I have come to consult you, Mr. Holmes, is no ordinary one.

HOLMES: It seldom is. Pray be seated.

VISITOR: (*Sits*) It will be not unknown to you, Mr. Holmes, that for some time there has been—shall we say—disagreement between Mr. Gladstone and Her Gracious Majesty, Queen Victoria. I have here a diplomatic communication in Her Majesty's own hand, sent to Mr. Gladstone on December 15, 1886. You are empowered to read it. (*Hands important-looking document to Holmes*)

WATSON: These are deep waters, Holmes.

HOLMES: Her Majesty, I perceive, was not amused.

VISITOR: She was indeed (*hesitates*) somewhat vexed. (*Then suddenly amazed*) But how could *you* possibly know—

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HOLMES: Her Majesty has twice underlined the word "bastard." And she has placed three exclamation points following her instructions as to what Mr. Gladstone should do with the Naval Treaty involving a certain foreign power. Surely our inference is obvious.

WATSON: Excellent!

HOLMES: But very superficial. (*Reading again*) "Even that German sausage, my late husband, could have done better." Hmm! Yes! But how do these diplomatic matters concern me?

VISITOR: Mr. Holmes, the Prime Minister has been poisoned!

WATSON: What?

VISITOR: On December 24th Mr. Gladstone received—apparently as a Christmas present from Queen Victoria—a case of Scotch whiskey.

HOLMES: I see. And did the case indeed contain whiskey?

VISITOR: Whiskey, yes. But each bottle was most unhappily charged with two ounces of prussic acid!

WATSON: Merciful heaven! The man is dead!

VISITOR: No, Dr. Watson, no! *Dei gratia,* he still lives! The strength of the whiskey neutralized the poison.

HOLMES: (*Blandly*) Come, come, this is most disappoi—most interesting. Have you any proof, my Lord, that the Prime Minister drank this particular whiskey?

VISITOR: (*Producing document*) Here is a letter of thanks, in Mr. Gladstone's own hand, written on Christmas Eve. Pray read it aloud.

HOLMES: Will you oblige, Watson?

WATSON: (*Very dignified, clears throat gravely, and reads*) December 24th, 1886. Illustrious Madam: How extremely kind of you to send me this case of whiskey for Christmas! I have never tasted such superb whiskey in my life. The whiskey you have sent me for Christmas is superb. I keep tasting it and how kind of you to sen me thish wondrous whichkey which I keep tasting for Xmas. It really is mosh kind of you to keep sending me this whiskey in cases which I kep tashing for whichmas. Hic! Dock, dickory dock, and kissmus.

VISITOR: Can there be any doubt, Mr. Holmes?

HOLMES: None whatever. Then it is your belief, my Lord, that Queen Victoria herself is the poisoner?

VISITOR: No, Mr. Holmes! (*Horrified*) A thousand times, no! But think of the scandal! It bids fair to rend asunder the fabric of the Empire! You must come down to Sussex and investigate. Will you come?

HOLMES: No, my lord. I will not.

WATSON: (*Amazed*) Holmes, this is unworthy of you! Why won't you go?

HOLMES: Because this man is not Lord Cosmo Conk-Singleton! (*Sensation. Holmes produces revolver*) Let me present you, Watson, to none other than Professor Moriarty.

WATSON: Professor Moriarty!

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HOLMES: Your double disguise as a younger man, my dear Professor, deceived me for perhaps ten seconds. The note from Mr. Gladstone seems quite genuine. But the letter from Her Majesty is a manifest forgery.

WATSON: Forgery, Holmes?

HOLMES: Her language, Watson! Her language!

WATSON: You mean—

HOLMES: Queen Victoria, Watson, would never have written in so slighting a fashion of her late husband, Prince Albert. They intended the letter to lure me to Sussex while the Scarborough emeralds were stolen from Yorkshire, not knowing —(*Holmes produces emeralds from his pocket*)—that Lord Scarborough had already given them to me for safekeeping!

VISITOR: (*In a grating voice*) One day, Mr. Holmes, you will try my patience too far!

(*Curtain*)

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a *NEW* Inspector Maigret story by

GEORGES SIMENON

first publication in the United States

It was a filthy crime, an inexcusable crime, a callous crime, an almost scientific crime. And so Inspector Maigret—the patient, persistent, imperturbable Maigret, the sober, stubborn Maigret— was up to his old game: having the suspect followed, step by step, minute by minute, from morning to night and from night to morning, ostentatiously watched, never permitted out of sight, never permitted a breathing spell—to make sure that if one or the other must give in at last, it should be the hunted man . . .

INSPECTOR MAIGRET'S WAR OF NERVES

by GEORGES SIMENON

IT WAS FATAL, IN A CASE OF THIS kind, to allow oneself to become disheartened.

Routine investigations, as they say, had been in progress for twelve days now; Inspector Janvier and Sergeant Lucas, working in shifts, had kept at it with inexhaustible patience, but Inspector Maigret, too, had put in a good few hours of overtime, for he and he alone knew just what he was driving at.

This morning Lucas had telephoned him from the Boulevard des Batignolles:

"It looks to me as if our birds are ready for take-off. They're packing their suitcases. The chambermaid has just tipped me off."

At eight o'clock Maigret, a suitcase at his feet, was in a taxi keeping watch not far from the Hotel Beausejour.

It was raining. It was a Sunday. At a quarter-past eight the young couple came out of the hotel with three suitcases and hailed a taxi. At half-past eight they drew up at one of the brasseries at the Gare du Nord, the one facing the great clock.

Maigret, too, paid off his taxi.

His "birds" were on the café ter-

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race. He sat down at the next table, making not the smallest effort to avoid being seen.

On top of the steady drizzle it was very cold. The couple had chosen a table near one of the heaters. Catching sight of Inspector Maigret, the man involuntarily raised his hand to his bowler hat, while his companion hunched more closely in her fur coat.

"Waiter! A grog!"

The others were having grog too. People went past their table, brushing against them, and the waiter bustled to and fro.

A man's head might be at stake, but it made no difference to the life of a great railway station on a rainy Sunday morning.

Facing them, the minute hand moved in jerks round the dial of the clock, and at nine the couple got up and walked to the window.

"Two singles, second class, Brussels."

"One single, second class, Brussels," Maigret said, almost like an echo.

Then the crowded platform, where the couple at last boarded the train and settled into a compartment right at the end near the engine, followed by Maigret, who hoisted his case on to the luggage rack. People were exchanging kisses.

The young man in the bowler hat got out, went to a newsstand and came back with a bundle of daily papers and magazines.

It was the Berlin express, packed with people speaking every language under the sun. The train moved off and the young man, without taking off his gloves, started to read a newspaper.

His companion, who seemed to feel the cold, put out her hand in an instinctive gesture and rested it on his.

A voice said, "Is there a restaurant car?"

"After the frontier, I think," someone answered.

"What about Customs?"

"All done on the train. They come on at Saint-Quentin."

The suburbs—woodland as far as the eye could see—a brief stop at Compiegne. From time to time the young man looked up from his paper, his glance resting on Maigret's impassive face.

The young man was tired—that much was obvious.

Maigret, watching him out of the corner of his eye, thought he looked paler than he had recently, more nervous, more tense, and Maigret could have sworn that the young man had not taken in a word of the paper he had been reading for the past hour.

"Aren't you hungry?" the young woman asked.

"No."

The carriage was dark and filled with smoke from pipes and cigarettes. Outside, there were village streets, wet and empty, and churches in which perhaps they were celebrating Mass.

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And Maigret was not even attempting to go over all the facts again, one by one. For the past two and a half weeks he had thought of nothing else. He was almost sick of the whole business, and that was what he had to guard against.

The young man facing him was soberly dressed, more like an Englishman than a Parisian, in a dark gray suit, a gray overcoat, a bowler hat, and, to complete the outfit, an umbrella which was lying on the rack behind him.

If his name had been spoken in the carriage it would have startled everyone, for it was still in the news. Indeed, it figured in many of the newspapers lying open on the passengers' knees.

An impressive name: Jehan d'Oulmont. A distinguished Belgian family, some of whose members had made places in history.

Jehan d'Oulmont had fine-drawn features but a rather too delicate complexion. He flushed readily, and his face was often contorted with nervous twitching.

Twice he had been brought face to face with Maigret in the Inspector's office at police headquarters, and each time, though Maigret had questioned him for hours on end, the young man had remained quite unshaken.

"You won't deny that you've brought nothing but misery to your family in the last two years?"

"That's their affair!"

"You were a law student at Louvain University until you were expelled for gross misconduct."

"I was living with a woman."

"I beg your pardon! This woman was being kept by an Antwerp businessman."

"I don't see what difference that makes!"

"When your family disowned you, you came to Paris . . . and spent most of your time hanging around the racetracks and night spots . . . You called yourself the Comte d'Oulmont, though you haven't any right to the title."

"Some people got a kick out of it."

He was a cool customer, for all his unhealthy pallor.

"Then you took up with Sonia Lipchitz—you knew all about her past, of course."

"I wouldn't presume to sit in judgment on a woman, whatever she had done in the past."

"By the time she was twenty-three, Sonia Lipchitz had already been kept by a number of men. Her last protector left her a substantial fortune, and it took her less than two years to squander the lot."

"Well that shows I wasn't after her money."

"You couldn't help knowing that your uncle, the Comte Adalbert d'Oulmont—quaint Christian names do seem to run in your family—anyway, as I was saying, you couldn't help knowing that your uncle was always in Paris for a few days every month, and that he stayed at the Hotel du Louvre."

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"It was his way of compensating for the blameless life he felt obliged to lead in Brussels."

"You may be right. At any rate, your uncle had been staying regularly at the Hotel du Louvre for years, and he always booked the same suite, Number 318. He went riding every morning in the Bois de Boulogne and lunched afterwards at some smart restaurant. Then he went back to the hotel and stayed there, shut up in his suite, until five o'clock."

"I'll bet he needed the rest, too!" retorted the young man cynically. "At his age!"

"The barber and manicurist went up to him at five o'clock.

"Next thing he was off to the night spots, chasing after the pretty girls until two in the morning."

"True enough."

For, although the Comte d'Oulmont had at one time of his life been a distinguished diplomat, it was undeniably true that in his later years he had assumed the habits and manner of an elderly stage gallant, growing into the part until at last the illusion was complete even to the wig.

"Your uncle was a rich man."

"So I've always been told."

"He helped you several times, financially."

"And morally. There was always a sermon thrown in. That way he got his money's worth."

"Two days before the tragedy you introduced him to your mistress, Sonia Lipchitz, in a bar on the Champs-Elysées."

"As you might have introduced him to your wife."

"Really? You all three had an aperitif together, then you made some excuse for leaving them on their own. A business appointment, wasn't it? . . . At that time you and Sonia were on your uppers, as they say—flat broke. You had been living for some time in the Hotel Berry off the Champs-Elysées and you had run up quite a sizable bill and hadn't a hope of paying it. So there was nothing for it but to move to your present, shall we say, modest quarters—a hotel in the Boulevard des Batignolles."

"Am I a criminal for that?"

"One must assume that Sonia didn't appeal to your uncle. At any rate, he left her as soon as they had had dinner, and went off to some backstreet show."

"I'm to blame for that too, I suppose."

"Two days later, on Friday at about half-past three, the Comte d'Oulmont was murdered in his suite where he was resting as usual. According to the police doctors he died of a violent blow struck with a lead pipe or an iron bar."

"I was searched," the young man said with a sneer.

"I know. And what's more, you had an alibi. You showed me your betting book the next day—I know you're crazy about racing. On the afternoon of the murder you were

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at Longchamps, and you backed a couple of horses in each race—the tote tickets were in your coat pocket to prove it. And there were the friends who ran into you once or twice during the afternoon."

"Well, there you are!"

"There's nothing to show that you were there the whole time—you could have hopped into a taxi, gone up to your uncle's suite—"

"Did anyone see me?"

"You've been to the Hotel du Louvre often enough. If you know your way about, no one pays much attention to your comings and goings. All the same, one of the bellboys thinks he remembers—"

"A bit vague, wouldn't you say?"

"Then there was the money stolen from your uncle's room—thirty-two thousand Belgian francs—"

"If I had taken it I could have been out of the country in no time."

"Yes, I know. And nothing was found at your hotel. Better still, your mistress pledged her last two rings two days later at the municipal pawn shop—she got two thousand francs for them, and that's what you're living on now."

"Well then!"

That was all there was to it. In other words, the perfect crime. It was one of those alibis that are almost impossible to break . . .

On the afternoon of the murder Jehan had been seen at the races. But at what time?

He had backed a number of horses, but on some races his mistress could have laid his bets for him. It was not far from Longchamps to the Rue de Rivoli.

A lead pipe, an iron bar? Things anyone could pick up and get rid of without the least difficulty. And it needed no great skill to slip out of a busy hotel without being seen.

What of the two pawned rings and Jehan d'Oulmont's betting book?

"You admit yourself," the young man had said, "that my precious uncle occasionally had women visitors. Why not follow that up?"

And logically speaking, there was nothing wrong with his story.

It was a perfectly consistent and reasonable line to take. So much so that when, after the second investigation, he presented himself at police headquarters at the Quai des Orfèvres, seeking permission to return to Belgium, there was, for want of evidence, no alternative but to let him go.

And this was why, for the past twelve days, Inspector Maigret had been at his old game; having his man followed, step by step, minute by minute, from morning to night and from night to morning ostentatiously followed, to make sure that if one or the other must give in at last, it should be the hunted man rather than Maigret.

This was why he had made a point of following the young man this morning, getting into the same compartment, choosing a seat fac-

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ing him—the young man who had acknowledged his presence with a casual nod, knowing that for hours to come he would have to keep up the pretense of not having a care in the world.

It was a filthy crime. An inexcusable crime. The more hateful for having been committed by a relative of the victim, by a well-educated and apparently perfectly sane young man. Moreover, it was a callous crime. An almost scientific crime.

Juries demand that men pay for such crimes with their heads!

And this particular head jerked up suddenly—the head of a rather white-faced young man with the faintest tinge of color on the cheekbones, as the Customs men came in the door.

It was touch and go whether there would be a scene in the compartment.

Maigret had given instructions by telephone, and the couple were subjected to a thorough search, so thorough as to attract embarrassing attention.

And the result? Nothing whatsoever.

Jehan d'Oulmont smiled his pallid smile. He smiled at Maigret, whom he recognized as his enemy.

He also knew that this was a war of nerves, and that it was his head that was at stake.

One of them was omniscient: the murderer. He knew when, how, at what moment, in what circumstances, the crime was committed.

But what of the other? Maigret puffing away at his pipe in spite of the scowling woman next to him—what did he know, what had he found out?

Yes, it was a war of nerves. Once they were across the frontier, Maigret would no longer have any power to intervene, and they were already within sight of the first mining village of the Borinage.

Well, then, what was he doing there? Why was he so persistent? Why, when the couple went to the dining car for an aperitif, did he follow them to their table and sit facing them, silent, and menacing?

Why, when they reached Brussels, did he check in at the Palace, where Jehan d'Oulmont and his mistress had taken a suite?

Could it be that Maigret had discovered a flaw in the alibi? Had Jehan d'Oulmont overlooked anything? Had he betrayed himself by some trifling slip?

Surely not! If this was so, they would have arrested him in France and handed him over to the French courts, where there was no escaping the death penalty.

And at the Palace, Maigret had the room next to theirs.

Maigret kept his door open, followed the couple down into the restaurant, strolled behind them along the shops in the Rue Neuve, went into a brassierie with them, stubborn and imperturbable as ever.

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Sonia was almost as troubled as her companion.

Next day she stayed in bed until two o'clock, and the couple had lunch in their room. And they could hear the sound of the telephone as Maigret lifted the receiver to order his meal.

One day . . . two days . . . The two thousand francs could not last forever.

Maigret was still there, his pipe in his mouth, his hands in his pockets, somber and patient.

But what did he know? Who could tell what he knew?

The truth was that Maigret knew nothing. Maigret had a feeling. Maigret was certain he was right. He would have staked his reputation on it.

But, although he had turned over the problem in his head a hundred times, it always came back to the same thing. The Paris taxi drivers had been questioned, so had innumerable professional racegoers; but nothing had come of it.

"You know how it is—we see so many of them! Maybe? . . ."

The worst of it was that there was nothing striking about Jehan d'Oulmont, and people who were shown his photograph promptly identified him as someone else.

Intuition was not enough. Certainty was not enough. Justice demands proof, and proof was what Maigret was still seeking.

Which of them, he wondered, would be the first to weaken? He strolled behind the couple in the Botanical Gardens. He went to the movies with them in the evenings.

He lunched and dined in brasseries where the food was excellent, just as he liked it, and drank his fill of beer.

After the rain came slushy falls of snow. By Tuesday, Maigret figured that his victims could have scarcely three hundred Belgian francs left. Maybe he was hoping that now, at last, they would have to start drawing on their loot.

It was an exhausting life, and even in the night he had to be alert to the smallest sound from the next room. But like a bloodhound on the scent he would sweat his inside out rather than give up.

So far no one about the place had noticed anything amiss. To the hotel staff Jehan d'Oulmont was a guest like any other. They had no inkling that his head sat so precariously on his shoulders.

The three of them were in a nightclub and Sonia was dancing with someone. Afterward, the someone seemed to vanish, but was back in an hour, asking her for another dance.

Teasingly he took her handbag from her and played with it for a while.

Presently this someone, a well-bred young man to all appearances, waved a friendly greeting to d'Oulmont across the room.

It did not amount to much. Jehan

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and Sonia had been three days in Brussels. All the same it was the turning point for Maigret, a hopeful sign at long last.

What he did next was so out of character that Mme. Maigret would have been dumfounded.

He made for the bar of the night club, and far from ignoring the advances of the women clustered around it, he stayed drinking with them, working himself up, by the look of it, into a state of tipsy high spirits.

At last, staggering a little, he went over to Sonia and asked her to dance.

"If you wish," she said indifferently.

She laid her bag on the table with a quick glance at her lover, but he too was making his way on to the dance floor, with one of the night-club hostesses.

At that moment, as the two couples mingled with the crowd on the dance floor, in the orange glow of the lights, who could have foreseen what was to come?

The dance was over, and suddenly Maigret was no longer alone. Coming toward d'Oulmont's table with him was a little man dressed in black and it was he who spoke.

"Monsieur Jehan d'Oulmont? . . . Quiet please. We don't want a scene. In the name of the Belgian Sûreté, I arrest you . . ."

The handbag was still there on the table—Maigret seemed to have his mind on other things.

"What's the charge?"

"An extradition order which . . ."

Then d'Oulmont's hand reached out for the bag. Suddenly the young man was standing erect and pointing a gun at Maigret.

"Well, here's another order, one that won't get Maigret into *heaven,* anyway," he growled.

A shot.

Maigret was still on his feet, his hands in his pockets.

Jehan, the gun still in his hand, panicked. The people on the dance floor scattered. General pandemonium . . .

"You see the point?" Maigret was saying to the head of the Brussels Sûreté. "I had no proof, almost nothing to go on.

"And I knew he was quite as smart as I was.

"What if he had killed his uncle? I could never prove it. And very likely he'd have got away with it if . . ."

"If?"

"If he hadn't once been a law student and if the death penalty hadn't lapsed in Belgium. Let's put it this way. He kills his uncle in France because he's desperate for money. He knows he's risking his neck.

"He comes to Brussels as a fugitive, fully realizing that at any time he may be arrested on a charge that if proved would mean certain extradition.

"And there am I still dogging his footsteps! In other words, am I on

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to something? Have I any proof? There's no way out for him.

"Or rather, there is one way, one course that can save him from the guillotine, that saved the murderer, Danse. If he commits *another murder* before the extradition order can be put into effect, he must stand trial in the Belgian courts, and under Belgian law he will not be executed, but imprisoned for life.

"It was to drive him onto the horns of his dilemma that I trailed after him, step by step. He hadn't a gun . . .

"The sign from his mistress that night, when they were both at their wits' end, led me to believe that with the connivance of an old friend they had managed to get hold of a gun, and that it was in the handbag.

"While we were dancing, one of your men slipped a gun loaded with blanks into the bag, in place of the other gun.

"Then came the arrest.

"Jehan d'Oulmont panics. Jehan d'Oulmont, faced with execution, chooses life imprisonment in Belgium and fires. . . . You get the point?"

They got the point all right, the point that by committing a second murder, the murderer of the old Comte d'Oulmont had saved his neck.

Moreover, the young man's ironic smile proclaimed it: "So you won't have my head after all!"

Not his head, no. Still, it was something that the world at large had nothing more to fear from him. And that Inspector Maigret was free at last to think of other things.

(*translated by Eileen Ellenbogen*)

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We all know of armchair detectives, those sedentary sleuths who solve mysteries without visiting the scene of the crime, without questioning witnesses or suspects—in fact, without moving a step. Now let us introduce you to "Brains" Leone. He's the equivalent of an armchair detective—except in reverse. He's a crook flat on his back in a hospital bed. But while his body can barely move a muscle, his brain is as active as a Mexican jumping bean . . .

FIXED FEE

by PAUL PERRY

THE ROOM WAS NARROW AND EMPTY of furniture except for a porcelain stand and a hospital bed. In the bed, his body an almost imperceptible mound beneath gleaming white sheets, lay an old man. He lay very still. His head rested on a large pillow and behind him a bed-lamp cast its angled beam down across his face, touching only his hairless skull, leaving the rest of his face in shadow.

Kobak opened the door, wrinkled his nose distastefully, and stepped inside the room. He scowled at the old man, then called out, "Leone. You awake? Hey, Leone!" The expression of distaste on his dark, heavy face grew as he moved across the room to stand beside the bed.

He bent forward. "Hey, Leone. You dead or something?" he peered down into the shadowed eyesockets, saw that the eyelids were closed, and straightened up. He muttered a curse, reached out with one polished shoe, and kicked a leg of the bed. The veined eyelids snapped open as though a cord had been jerked. Pale gray eyes fixed on Kobak's face and from the bloodless lips issued a surprisingly deep and steady voice: "Kobak?"

"That's right. Now what have you got? And hurry it up—this place stinks."

"It's my medicine."

"You should get it sprayed or something. Dammit, what a stink! Well, what have you got?"

"It took you a long time to get here, Kobak. I put the word out three days ago." The voice was faintly accented.

"I'm a busy man, Leone."

"I heard about it. Barton is out and you're in."

"It was time for Barton to get out. He was a little man in a big job."

"And you're a big man?"

"I'm going to be, Leone. And there's going to be big money."

"I heard that too. Narcotics. Some other new things."

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"Anything," Kobak said with an expansive wave of his arm. "Anything goes in this town from now on, Leone."

For a moment the two men were silent, the pale gray eyes meeting the dark insolent ones. The dark ones were the first to turn away.

"Don't you keep any chairs in this damned room of yours?" grumbled Kobak. "Hell, you might as well be in jail." He shifted his feet and glanced around restlessly.

"No chairs," replied the old man, "but I won't be keeping you long."

"You're damned right you won't. Now tell me what you've got so I can get on my way. And it damned well better be good."

"How good does a hundred thousand dollars sound to you?"

Kobak didn't answer for a moment, and when he did speak the surliness had left his voice and his eyes had become calculating. "Tell me about it," he said.

"Jerome is back. He has a lot of money salted away in this town, Kobak."

"Hell, that's nothing new. He's one of the biggest fences in the country. I've dealt with him. But he keeps all that loot stashed away in safety-deposit boxes, and that buzzard would die before he pulled out one stinking cent. You mean you send out word to me that you've got a 'big important deal,' and all you got is this thing with Jerome? Leone," Kobak said shortly, "you're wasting my valuable time." He turned and headed toward the door.

"He's got a weakness now, Kobak," the old man said.

"A weakness?" Kobak stopped and turned around, frowning.

"A woman. He's married now. She's a real genteel type, from what I hear; and not bad-looking. And she's crazy about Jerome. I know; it don't make sense to me either. Jerome's a fat slob. But strange things happen. Anway, all you have to do is take a couple of men, break in on him at his apartment, and hold him while she goes after the money."

The pale lips of the old man stretched slightly in an attempt to smile. "I guess Jerome must think quite a bit of her, too; he had one box put in both their names. There's a hundred thousand in that one, Kobak."

"How do you know all this, Leone? How do you know how much is in the box? How do you know this broad won't head straight for the cops?"

"I've been out of circulation for a long time, Kobak, but I still have my contacts. You know how I used to operate. I need money, Kobak. I'm back in business."

Kobak walked over and stood beside the bed. He picked up a bottle of amber-colored medicine from the porcelain table. He shook the bottle, watching the bubbles form on top of the liquid. He set the bottle down and asked the old man, "And what do you expect out of this deal, Leone? You've been washed up

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for a long time. You can't expect much."

The old man licked his lips. "You were around when I used to be in business, Kobak. I didn't belong to nobody. I picked my own deals and made my own arrangements, and I never got less than ten thousand. Never."

"Those days are gone, Leone—the old days and Barton and 'Brains' Leone and his ten-grand tips. All gone, Leone."

"But you could cut two of your men in, Kobak. That would give you thirty thousand apiece and ten thousand for me. Listen, I need the money, Kobak. I need ten thousand."

Kobak shook his head. "It's strictly a no-good deal, Leone—this thing with Jerome, I mean. I don't like it. Too risky." He walked toward the door, turned and looked back. He shrugged. "Maybe I'll let some of the boys have it and if they do any good, well, I'll tell them to give you a little something. Maybe a couple of hundred."

He took a cigar from his pocket and lit it with a gold lighter. He puffed hard several times, blew out a cloud of smoke, and winked at the old man. "A couple of hundred will buy anything you need, Leone. Even," he said, smiling as he opened the door, "one hell of a nice big funeral wreath."

He was still chuckling when he got into his black limousine a minute later.

Kobak was surprised at the ease with which he got into Jerome's apartment. He simply went up in the elevator, paused outside the door to check his gun—making sure it was loose in his overcoat pocket—then reached out and tried the doorknob. The door swung right open. And there was fat Jerome perched on a big white sofa, nibbling delicately at a chicken leg and squeezing the knee of a tall thin brunette.

The brunette looked like the nervous type, and when Kobak stepped into the room she gave out a shrill little scream and her eyes flew wide open and she jerked frantically at her skirt. Jerome dropped the chicken leg and shoved his hand into the pocket of his smoking jacket.

"Hold it, Jerome!" barked Kobak. His own automatic was pointed directly at Jerome's bulging belly.

"What the hell do you want, Kobak?"

"First," replied Kobak, "I want that gun out of your pocket. Then I want something else." He watched Jerome remove the gun, then he sat down and explained what else he wanted.

"I'd better do as he says, dear," whispered the brunette. "He looks—well, he might do as he says, and I certainly don't want him hurting you."

"To hell with him!" growled Jerome. "He's not going to pull that trigger. This building is full of peo-

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ple; the cops would be here in no time. And Kobak can't afford another run-in with the cops. Can you, Kobak? Not on anything they can pin on you. One more and that's it, huh, Kobak? One more and they throw away the key."

"Listen, I own the cops," said Kobak. "I own this town and every damn cop in it."

"And the new D.A.," said Jerome, smiling. "Do you own him, too? Is he in your pocket?"

"Listen," Kobak said. "I can't shoot you maybe, but I can sure as hell beat you to death." He stepped up beside the sneering Jerome and before the fat man realized what he was going to do, Kobak laid the barrel of the pistol hard across his skull. Jerome went down like a bag of cement.

Kobak turned to the brunette. "Go get the money," he told her.

She sidled fearfully past him and hurried out the door.

"And no cops," Kobak called after her, "or your husband's a dead man."

Fifteen minutes later something big and heavy thumped against the door. "This is the police, Kobak! Don't make a move! The back door's covered so there's no way out! Don't give us any trouble, Kobak!"

Kobak swung around to face the frowning Jerome. "That dirty little —she went straight to the cops! Well, she fixed your wagon, but good! She sure as hell—"

He didn't finished the sentence because at that moment the door crashed in. Kobak had just enough time to send one bullet into Jerome's bulging belly before a police .38 put three rounds into his own wildly jerking body.

"It happened just exactly as you said it would."

"Of course," said the old man. "That's the only way it could happen." He looked up at his visitor. "Of course there *was* the possibility that you might take the hundred thousand dollars and keep right on going."

The Widow Jerome laid her purse on the porcelain table beside the bottle of amber-colored medicine, then turned to look down at the old man. "The idea occurred to me," she told him. "But you know Jerome. If he'd gotten away from Kobak alive he would have found me eventually. And besides," she said, opening the handbag and pulling out a roll of bills, "there's a lot more of this stuff scattered around. What I'm going to do now is take a nice little vacation, somewhere I can forget I ever saw that fat ugly slob—South America maybe, or Hawaii. Then when things have cooled down, after a month or so, I'll come back and see how many of those safety-deposit boxes the poor Widow Jerome can get her fingers into. In the meantime I've got a hundred thousand—"

"You mean *ninety* thousand,

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don't you?" the old man said drily.

The brunette studied the old man's face for a moment, then she frowned and peeled off ten of the bills. "It seems like an awful lot, but a deal is a deal, I guess." She placed the bills reluctantly on the porcelain table, then picked up her handbag and moved toward the door. "Well, I've got some packing to do."

She stopped at the door, looked back, and said, "Maybe we can do business again sometime."

"Maybe," said the old man.

Thirty minutes after the brunette had left, the old man's door was opened quietly and a small dapper man stepped into the room. He walked across and stood silently at the foot of the old man's bed.

"Any trouble?" asked the old man.

"None at all. They all came back into the fold like a flock of lost sheep. Kobak just had them snowed with his big-money talk. I don't think he would have lasted anyway, Leone. He had some pretty wild schemes. Narcotics, a distillery, a wide-open town. I don't think it would have happened."

"It's happened before," said the old man. "You've got a short memory, Barton." The old man closed his eyes and lay quietly for several moments. Finally he opened his eyes and said, "I'm tired, Barton. I'd better rest."

The dapper man smiled. "Sure, Leone." He reached in his pocket, pulled out a white envelope, and dropped it on the table beside the old man's bed. "I feel like I ought to give you more than the usual for this one."

"Ten thousand is enough."

"Well," said the dapper man, "I guess I'd better be going. Anytime you have anything for me, Leone, just send me word. I can—"

"But I have something for you now," said the old man. "An easy one. Just a matter of taking some money from a greedy woman."

"How much?"

"Ninety thousand. That's eighty thousand for you and—"

"—ten thousand for Leone." The dapper man smiled.

"Of course," said the old man. "Ten thousand for me. Never less." And he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

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a *NEW* crime story by

JAMES POWELL

One never knows what to expect in a new story by James Powell—his range of theme and subject matter, his scope of interest and preoccupation, his unusual and individualistic point of view are astonishing for a new writer whose first published story appeared in EQMM only two and a half years ago . . . For those of you who remember your own "golden summers," this story will tickle your nostalgia buds; if you had no "golden summers" of your own, this story will tickle your fancy. And as always, there is something more in James Powell's work—something more serious under the surface . . .

THE DARING DAYLIGHT MELON ROBBERY

by JAMES POWELL

IF YOU'VE EVER SEEN PICTURES OF a towheaded kid with fishing pole and mongrel dog, the kid walking barefoot down a country road, then you probably subscribed to the same magazines my father did when I was eleven years old.

I was willing to tolerate the big overalls and the dogs named Spot. But I do remember once suggesting to my mother that by going around without shoes I ran the risk of stepping on rusty nails and getting lockjaw. She looked concerned for a moment but then said, "Theodore, your father wants you to have all the things he missed as a boy."

My father was Town Constable and Fire Chief. He was a big earnest-faced man with thick glasses in steel frames. His contemporaries called him "Faunt" and the younger people called him "Chief." I was never sure what the Town Constable part of his job consisted of except sitting in the one-room stucco lockup he'd papered with Wanted posters and turned into an office.

But as Fire Chief he wore black gumboots, conducted fire drills at school, tested hydrants, extinguishers, and the coils of rope bolted to the floor next to every upstairs window in the Grand Central Hotel. You never knew when he was going to come clambering down the

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front of the hotel on a rope. There weren't many fathers who did that and I was very proud of him. So even though I was a quiet, bookish kid, I was willing to dress the Huck Finn part.

But the hell-raising was something else again. Every evening when I came home my father would say, "Hi there, Ted. Been out raising hell?" And I would answer with a guilty smile because I hadn't been, which always pleased him because he thought it meant I had. It was all the hell-raising I was expected to be doing that got me mixed up with the Daring Daylight Melon Robbery and its intended victim, Bunny Thomas, the town tailor.

When I was six or seven I thought that Bunny Thomas was called Bunny because he would occasionally amuse some kid like myself who had come to read the Sunday funnies in the lobby of the Grand Central Hotel by putting his hands together in an intricate way that threw the wriggling shadow of a rabbit on the wall.

But when I was older someone laughed and said no, his name came from his ears which were, in fact, uncommonly large and pink. By that time I also knew that Bunny Thomas was as close to being a hermit as a man living and working in town could be. Except for Sunday afternoons sitting off by himself in the hotel lobby, he seldom put a foot outside his shop. Except for tailoring, his only interest was picking up distant radio stations on his old bullet-shaped radio with the fretwork oak leaves framing the speaker.

It was the distance, not the programs, that interested him. He combed the dial for signals that were as far away from where he was as he could find. And Bunny never spoke, or at least spoke so little that it could be said he never did. Even at a suit fitting he worked in silence and always with one of his large ears cocked at his radio, ready for station identification. On those rare times when you passed him on the street he looked the same way, as though he was listening to something at a great distance. Or perhaps that was only his ears.

The events that led up to the assault on Bunny's melon patch began in the late spring of 1940, the first spring of the war—although in those days when anyone in our southern Ontario town spoke of the war they still meant the First War. My father drove into Gladstone every Monday night for a reserve officers' training course. Sunday afternoons we often sat out in the grape arbor and I would hold his identification handbook while he rhymed off the distinguishing marks, fire power, and effective range of tanks, the enemy's and ours.

I remember one particular Sunday when my father started asking

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me about The Golden Eagles. A few kids my own age sometimes got together in our woodshed on rainy days. It was more a discussion group than anything else. But my father got the idea that it was my "gang," that his son was the Grand Dragon of the Golden Eagles. I suppose I must have helped the idea along. But I never lied. I was incapable of lying to my father. At the same time, I was pretty good at getting him to jump to his own conclusions.

For example, when he started getting after me about always having my nose in a book, I would make a big thing about sneaking out to the woodshed where I'd hidden a supply of old cigarette butts. I'd do my reading out there and then grind a few butts into the dirt floor. I also started faking a good smoker's cough. My father was as pleased as punch.

In any event, this particular Sunday my father started asking me about The Golden Eagles and what kind of hell we raised. My answers grew vaguer and vaguer and I was just about to confess the whole business when my father leaned forward and placed his hand solemnly on my shoulder. "I admire you for respecting The Golden Eagle secrecy oath, Ted," he said. I didn't feel very proud of myself.

Not long after that I accidentally ground a couple of cigarette butts with lipstick on them into the woodshed floor. My father was confused for a day or two, but then he started to get suspicious.

My next big mistake came just before the end of the school term. Miss Fletcher, the seventh-grade teacher, mislaid her upper plate during recess and had to give us the afternoon off. I decided to pull what I called the "playing hookey trick." I hung around the lockup and ducked each time my father saw me. He always seemed to get a kick out of thinking I was skipping school. I thought I'd made my point and had just slipped through a hole in a board fence when three girls' voices piped up, "Hello there, Chief." Three girls from my class.

"Shouldn't you young ladies be in school?" said my father. They told him why they shouldn't and went off down the street.

The pause couldn't have been as long as I remember it before my father said, "All right, Ted. You can come out now."

My mother soon sensed there was something amiss between my father and me. But all she could do was smile sympathetically and feed me straight lines. "Well, what have you been up to, Theodore?" she said one evening about a week later.

"Oh, I've been out raising hell, I guess," I said.

My father grunted from behind his newspaper.

Actually I had spent the whole day doggedly throwing rocks at the glass insulators on the telegraph

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poles along the railway tracks. I'd heard that the railway police could arrest you for breaking them. But I hadn't hit any, so there didn't seem much point in mentioning that.

So I still needed some hell to raise to get back into my father's good graces. That was why, when I discovered that Bunny was growing muskmelons in the yard between his shop and McCarter's Drug Store, my first thought was to steal one and let myself get caught in the act. But I couldn't even do that, because Bunny had shown me the melon patch himself. "Just between you and me and the lamppost," he had said. Later, when that didn't matter any more, I still thought we'd get caught, even though Russell Sullivan said that with a plan, split-second timing, and everything going like clockwork we could pull it off right under Bunny's nose and in broad daylight. The Crime of the Century.

"Dear, why don't you tell Theodore about the surprise?" said my mother.

My father hoisted his newspaper a bit higher. "Your mother thinks you're old enough to have a suit with long pants," he said flatly.

"Gee, that's fine. That's certainly fine," I said, smiling first at my mother and then at the crease in my father's newspaper and hoping I wasn't laying it on too thick.

"After dinner you go over to Bunny Thomas and he'll measure you up," said my mother. "Poor old Bunny." She said it again: "Poor old Bunny." And I realized I was being fed another straight line.

"Hey, Dad," I said. "Why doesn't Bunny Thomas talk or anything?"

At first I thought he hadn't heard me. Then he put down the paper and shaded his eyes with one hand. "Bunny Thomas," he said. "Bunny Thomas. Now therein lies a tale." My father had memorized all my grandfather's stories and could never resist telling one.

"Now in his day," he began, "Bunny Thomas was a baritone member of the Presbyterian choir and very active in the affairs of the town which, according to him, lacked zing. One of his pet schemes, as I recall, was to lure in the tourist trade with an annual tulip festival —papier-mâché windmills and everybody in town wearing baggy pants and wooden shoes. When the war came in 1914 and old Henry Bauer was asked to resign from the town council because of his startling resemblance to von Hindenburg, Bunny was invited to take his place. But that came later.

"Bunny was also the ringleader of the town wags. There was Bunny and let's call the others A, B, and C. A was a schoolteacher. B was a teller in the bank, and C, until he could find something better, was racking pool balls at the hotel. If there were any high jinks going on, those four would generally be the culprits.

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"Let me embellish that point. My father—that would be your grandfather—owned a small farm on the edge of town. Speculations in oil were big at the time and he made a bit of money from oil options on the cow pasture. Every time a driller came up dry and left town, my father would plant a tree in the hole. The next speculator who came along, not seeing any old drill holes, would often take another option. Nobody ever brought in a gusher. All my father really got out of it was a fine stand of trees in the pasture.

"But one year some drillers struck natural gas. It shot a part of the drill up through the top of their rig and they packed up in disgust. A week later, with new drillers in the area, my father discovered that the gas pressure had blown the tree he'd planted out of that hole like a cork out of a bottle. Improvising with what was closest at hand, he rolled an almost new saltlick block over the hole. But the drillers passed him by anyway.

"Two weeks later he noticed the saltlick block was gone. He found it across the road in the cemetery where the pressure had lobbed it. He almost passed it by among the headstones. The saltlick block had landed in the Ingersoll plot among Ingersoll's late father and mother and the ten of his nineteen children who had died young. It had come down squarely right between 'Robert, Beloved Son' and 'Flora, Beloved Daughter.' My father refused to take the block back once it had landed on hallowed ground. 'We'll just have to run the cows over to it now and again after dark,' he said.

"But he must have mentioned it around because a few nights later Bunny Thomas and A, B, and C sneaked out with a lantern and chiseled 'Homer, Beloved Son' on the saltlick block. A joke on my father whose name was Homer.

"Ingersoll, not having a yard in town, spent Sundays puttering around his cemetery plot, laying out flowerbeds, coaxing the ivy up the headstones, and digging up dandelions with his penknife. If it hadn't been for his wife he'd probably have put in a tomato frame or two. When Ingersoll came across the new headstone he was frankly bewildered. Seeing his wife had noticed his confusion, he grasped at a straw and said thoughtfully, 'You know, in a way Homer here was always my favorite.' Mrs. Ingersoll blinked and, grasping at the other end of the same straw, said, 'But you always said he was too shy and retiring.' 'But smart as a whip,' insisted Ingersoll.

"After that Ingersoll talked a lot around town about his dead son Homer who was so shy but smart and whose memory he would always treasure. Distressed by this bizarre turn of events, Bunny Thomas said nothing. But for the next three years until the Ingersolls fol-

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lowed each other in death, Bunny would sneak out to the cemetery at the first frost and throw a tarpaulin over Homer's saltlick headstone to protect it from the snow. So you see, Bunny's pranks weren't malicious and everybody liked him.

"But then, of course, tragedy struck—1914. Bunny and A, B, and C rushed to the colors at once, eager to hang out their washing on the Siegfried Line, in the words of a popular song of the day. But Bunny didn't get to go. He was rejected because of eyes and age. A's troop transport was torpedoed off the Irish coast and A was lost. The next year, on a fine spring morning in Flanders, B was killed in one of the first gas attacks of the war. Then in 1917 C caught pneumonia in the trenches and died.

"Bunny took each death a little harder. And when C died Bunny went to Toronto to try to enlist again. Three weeks later he stepped off the train with a headache and a breath laced with whiskey. He walked straight from the station to his shop, never to emerge again as we knew him, but only as you see him now. The moral of this story —"

Then my father stopped abruptly, realizing from our smiles that my mother and I had conspired to lure him out from behind his newspaper and into a better humor by getting him to tell the story. He slid down in his chair with a grunt and raised the newspaper again.

Bunny was sitting in the static from his radio. He looked up and came over, pulling the tape from around his neck. I submitted docilely to the measuring, absorbed in my own problem of how to regain my father's esteem. I didn't really notice that Bunny had been talking until he said, "Let me ask you a question, Ted." Then I realized that he had been chatting away all along about what a strange thing coincidence was and how he'd measured my father for his first pair of long pants 25 years ago to that very day—"give or take a few months"—and what a big day that had been because my grandmother had kept him dressed up like Little Lord Fauntleroy in short pants until he was well into high school. And how funny it was that history repeats itself with fathers and sons.

Then he said, "Let me ask you a question, Ted. Do you believe in dreams? We all have them but we don't all believe in them. Well, let me tell you of a strange one I had last Christmas Eve, following a day on which I had taken stock of my friends and found that everyone I'd grown up with had passed away, or a reasonable facsimile. I dreamed I was lying awake out back when I had a visitation from Byron Fiske, the previous owner of this shop."

I knew about Byron Fiske. My grandfather used to tell the story about the handsome young man with the dashing mustache who had fought in Italy with a contin-

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gent of papal zouaves from Quebec and then become a salesman in ladies' finery traveling through Ontario until he was smitten by Miriam Bell, a local girl. He had opened his shop—Fiske's: Everything for Milady—while courting her. But the women of the town hesitated to do business with a man so handsome that he made them giddy. Miriam Bell must have felt the same way for she married Dr. Henderson, the dentist. On her wedding day Byron Fiske dressed up in his Sunday best and hanged himself with a silk stocking in the back of the shop. The women's verdict was unrequited love. But my grandfather noted it was the end of the quarter and all the bills Fiske could not meet.

"Hold it a sec," said Bunny and went over to lean a large ear against the speaker of his radio. The station break came. "WOC, the World of Chiropractic, Davenport, Iowa, the States," he said. "Though I've gotten a better signal. But back to Byron Fiske. There he was in my dream standing tiptoe on the darkness beneath the middle rafter, his head cocked to one side; he was wearing his black broadcloth cutaway, wing collar, black ascot, gold scarf-pin and gray, cuffless trousers, and was rotating gently and fashionably, first one way, then the other.

"'Bunny,' he said, 'I've come from a troubled grave in my capacity as the Ghost of Suicides Past with a warning that a troubled grave is being kept warm for you in your capacity as the Ghost of Suicides Present.'

"'God bless us every one, Mr. Fiske,' I said, having read the book myself. 'But haven't you made a mistake? I'm not dead.'

"'As a doornail, Bunny,' said Mr. Fiske. 'We're a pair, you and I. We both turned our back on the world before our time and let it pass us by.'

"'I'll admit I've lost touch,' I said. 'But if I'm as black as you paint me, how come I'm still on this side of the grave, while you, unfortunately, are on the other side?'"

"'You're hanging on by the merest shadow, Bunny,' he said cryptically.

"'It seems to me I can still get back into the swim,' I said. 'While you, and I don't mean to turn the knife in the wound, can't. I can change my ways and in fact, I think I will.'

"Mr. Fiske smiled a pleased smile. 'That's what I was driving at,' he said. 'And now that I've done my good deed, maybe I'll get some peace myself, if there's any justice in the world.'

"And with that I dreamed I fell asleep," said Bunny. He took me by the elbow. "Now I can tell you're not a rowdy, Ted. So just between you and me and the lamppost I'll let you in on a secret that's normally not for little ears."

He took me over to the window above his workbench and pointed

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outside. As I said, the yard was the space between his shop and McCarter's Drug Store. It was about 15 feet wide and 30 feet long with an eight-foot board fence at each end. In the middle, opposite the window, was a full rain barrel buried in the ground. "They go for moisture," said Bunny, meaning the three dozen or so melons ripening away around the barrel.

My first thought, as I said, was to get caught trying to steal one. My father would have liked that. Later, when we were all up on McCarter's roof "casing the joint"—as Russell Sullivan described it—I still thought we'd end up getting caught, particularly when Russell insisted that it had to be done in broad daylight with Bunny there.

"That way it's robbery," he said. "Nobody likes a thief." But Bunny sat working at the window all the time, looking right out on the melons. Every minute or two he'd turn to fiddle with his radio, but he stayed right there. And even with a customer in the shop, Bunny was always coming back to the radio. There was no way into the yard except through a screen door from the shop. There was no cover in the yard except for a few lilac bushes along the McCarter wall.

"Hey, Russell," I said. "Suppose all six of us came over the back fence at once and made a dash for it. One melon apiece and over the other fence."

Russell looked at me scornfully. "Bunny'd be out in the yard like a shot," he said. "He'd catch a couple of us and recognize the rest. Do you want to get caught?" I did, but of course I couldn't say so. Russell shook his head. "Nobody's going to get recognized. Nobody's going to get caught," he said. "All we need is a plan and split-second timing."

But to get back to Bunny. He turned away from the window, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the melons. "This is one of the things I used to do, oh way back when," he said. "Everybody'd say 'Hey, let's all go over and split a melon with Bunny Thomas and talk about politics and old times.' It was really hail, hail the gang's all here. And it'll be that way again. But I decided last Christmas Eve to wait my time and explode on the town scene all at once, so to speak. They're almost ripe enough. When you come in for your first fitting, we'll split one."

"Fine," I said.

"What's the matter? Aren't you a muskmelon fancier?"

I told him about my problem with my father.

"Ted," he said, when I'd finished, "in my day I raised more than my share of hell around this town. I'll put on my thinking cap and see if I can't mastermind some real devilry for you. In a way it'll be like old times for me."

The next day I took Spot out along the railway tracks. Spot was

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my dog, my sixth dog named Spot since my father had given me the first on my ninth birthday. "What are you going to call your dog, son?" he had asked. I knew what was expected of me. "Spot," I had answered bitterly. "That's a fine name for a dog, son," my father had replied.

Sooner or later I'd get moody and take each one out to the fairgrounds where the rabbits were. Off they'd go like a shot. Then I'd walk home. That would be the last I saw of the dogs. I used to think the rabbits got them.

But because of the trouble with my father I'd kept this one longer than most. And he wasn't a bad dog. I had taken him out along the tracks to teach him to fetch a stick, a stunt I thought my father might like. But Spot seemed to think it was stupid too. We were just about to give up and go home when Russell Sullivan, Owen and Billy Smith, Leo Scott, and little Charlie Turnbull trooped by.

Russell Sullivan and his mother had moved to town the winter before to live with relatives because his father had joined the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry. You could always see Russell from a distance because he was always shooting his left arm up in the air to uncover his wrist watch, which had a sweep second-hand. Russell was in my class. He was very popular. Coming from the city, he had more movies behind him than we did. To the kids in a town where once a month an itinerant projectionist showed a Western at the Orange Lodge Hall, Russell was a celebrity —an intimate of James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart, John Garfield, and Turhan Bey.

"We can't waste our time talking to you, Teddy," said Russell as they came by, "because we've just started this new club, the Spitfires. Tough luck, but we've got this special membership rule down in black and white that you can't join."

I knew he'd made that last part up just to rile me. "Well, that's fine," I said, "and I wish you the best of luck on all scores." But Russell—Russell was Air Marshal of the Spitfires—kept on about how secret the club was with its codes, passwords, and handshakes until I heard myself saying that when it came to secrets I had a few of my own, like the whereabouts of a certain melon patch.

To make a long story short, Russell said that if I told them where the melons were they'd make me a Wing Commander in the Spitfires. If I didn't they'd pass a new bylaw going on record that I was a liar. I thought about that for a minute and then for reasons which I don't recall now but which must have had some meaning for a kid, I told them.

"Welcome aboard, Teddy," said Russell when the awe-inspiring Spitfire oath had been administered to me. "Keep your nose clean and you may end up A.A.M.—Assistant

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Air Marshal. Now we'd better case the joint."

The next thing I knew we all turned around and walked back to town in single file. I discovered that Wing Commander was one rank above little Charlie Turnbull.

Up on McCarter's roof with the others I felt a bit better about having given away Bunny's secret. As we watched him sitting there at his window, I was sure there was no way of stealing the melons without getting caught. After a while we all went home for dinner except Russell who stayed there, peering down into the yard and trying to devise a plan.

The next day was Sunday, which made me feel a bit better. I knew there would be no robbery on Sunday. Our town was big on the Lord's Day. Bunny would be sitting in the lobby of the Grand Central Hotel and the rest of us—the Spitfires—would be trapped inside our best clothes. But in the afternoon little Charlie Turnbull came by. After we had exchanged the secret handshake and password he told me that Russell had worked out a plan and called a meeting in the alley behind Bunny's shop.

When I arrived Russell was climbing back over the fence after having paced off the yard. He called the meeting to order, explaining with a wave of his wrist watch with the sweep second-hand that this was only going to be a rehearsal to get the timing down. Then he outlined his plan and a squadron of monarch butterflies began wheeling in my stomach: the plan sounded as if it might work!

At exactly one o'clock the next afternoon I was to go into Bunny's shop and distract him from the window on one pretext or another. Russell would scale the back fence, dash across the yard to the water barrel in the middle of the melon patch, and submerge himself, breathing through a straw. One owl hoot from Owen Smith watching from McCarter's roof meant Russell had made it. I was to leave the shop and wait across the street.

From then on, each time Bunny turned away from the window to fiddle with his radio, Owen Smith would toss down a pebble into the barrel. This was the signal to Russell to crawl halfway out of the water, grab a melon in each hand, and slip back under. He would stuff the melons in a burlap sack and give two owl hoots when he had enough. The next time Bunny turned away from the window after that, Owen would throw down a line of binder twine.

Three owl hoots from Russell would mean he'd tied up the sack. Owen and Billy Smith would pull it along the ground and hoist it up to the roof through the lilac bushes. It was harvest time for the pea farmers and every few minutes or so an almost roof-high wagonload of pea vines would plod through

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town on the way to the cannery. Owen and Billy would toss the sack on the top of the next wagonload that came along and give four owl hoots to little Charlie Turnbull who would climb up on the back of the wagon and ride out of town followed by Leo Scott on his bicycle. They would hide the sack in a culvert and cycle back to town.

Five owl hoots and I would go and distract Bunny again until I heard six owl hoots, which meant Russell had made it back over the fence.

I tried to look skeptical, but the plan was received with quiet awe by the rest of the Spitfires. Then Russell had us all take our places and we owl-hooted our way through a couple of rehearsals. They were dry runs: I stood in Bunny's doorway talking to myself as if I was distracting him from the window; Russell didn't actually get into the water barrel, and Owen and Billy Smith pretended to throw an imaginary sack on an imaginary load of pea vines.

When Russell was satisfied he came across the street to where I was standing. "Don't let anyone see you talking to me," he said out of the corner of his mouth and crouched down as if the were tying his soelace. "What do you think of the plan?"

"Isn't it kind of complicated for a couple of melons apiece?" I said.

"Not just a couple," said Russell. "We're going to clean them all out. We'll do the part with the sack three or four times. Then we're going to throw a big melon feed under the railway bridge and invite every kid in town. That's when I'll stand up and make this speech I've been rehearsing about how they should all join the Spitfires and how, when we're all one club with uniforms, salutes, and everything running like clockwork, we can start hitting the stores for protection money and muscle in on the bootlegging."

I hadn't bargained for us stealing all the melons or the bootlegging. But before I could say anything Russell said, "Cheese it."

"'Cheese it'?" I said.

"Here comes your dad. Look casual," said Russell, getting up and whistling away down the street.

I tried to look as if I was up to no good. "Hello there, Ted," said my father, not seeming to notice my expression. As he passed by I smelled brass polish. I knew he had been at the fire station polishing the engine. Working on Sundays was the secret vice among the men of the town.

I had trouble getting to sleep that night. The conversation at dinner hadn't made me feel any better. It was all about Bunny's sudden return to life. He'd slipped up into the choir loft during services at the Presbyterian church and joined his wavering baritone to the final hymn. I knew that was somehow connected with the melons, the ones we were out to steal because I'd let slip Bunny's secret. And what

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good would it do me? Russell's plan was probably going to work—no one would get caught. My father wouldn't even know I was raising hell until maybe later on when he got word that his son was a kingpin in bootlegging or something like that. I only got to sleep by telling myself that the Spitfires were just a bunch of kids, while Bunny was a grownup and should be able to stop us.

A Spitfire is loyal, true, and punctual. The next day at zero hour I stood in the open door of Bunny's shop.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," he said, turning round at his workbench by the window. My first suit fitting wasn't for a week, but after racking my brain I'd come up with what I thought was a good pretext for being there. Before I got a chance to use it, Bunny said, "Say now, here's a prank that always got us a lot of laughs. Before his death old Sym McKenzie was a notorious late sleeper at the Grand Central Hotel. Me and some chums of mine—"

"A, B, and C?" I said.

Bunny looked perplexed. "It doesn't matter who," he said. "There's no point in living in the past. Anyway, we used to carry old Sym, bedstead and all, down from the top floor of the hotel, hitch up a horse, and ride the bed up and down Main Street until he woke up. We worked that one a lot until he started chaining his bed to a waterpipe each night before he blew out the light."

Before I could work in my pretext for being there, Bunny said, "Say now, did you know there's a Town Council meeting tonight? And did you know I was on the Town Council? At least I've never sent in my resignation. Well, I've got a little idea for them about how to bring the tourists in. I won't tell you what it is. Let's just say it would mean young people like you dressing up like Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates once a year. By the way, your fitting is next week."

"It's about my suit I'm here," I said. "I don't know if it would cost any more, but I was wondering if something double-breasted wouldn't be more stylish."

"Stylish?" said Bunny in astonishment. "What are you, some kind of thug or gangster? I'd rather see you dead at my feet than in a double-breasted suit. Whatever possessed you to say that?"

"Well, the way I look at it," I said, quite pleased with my logic, "if the war keeps going until I'm old enough to lie about my age I might get to join up. Then I'd be wearing a uniform. So maybe this is my only chance to wear something double-breasted until after the war."

"Now that's nonsense," said Bunny with an uncertain smile. "You're only eleven years old."

"Look," I said, "I worked it out with some other kids. My father

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says there's a war every twenty-five years. That means if I miss this one, I'll be too old for the next. So I've got to count on this one lasting long enough. Me and the others may be kids, but we still want to do our bit for the War Effort."

Carried away by my patriotic fervor and suddenly remembering a phrase from my father's story about Bunny and his friends, A, B, and C, I added loudly, "We want to hang out our washing on the Siegfried Line too."

Bunny's ears turned as red as if a flashlight had been snapped on inside his head. He looked as if he was going to speak. At that moment the owl hoot came. I'd gotten Russell into the water barrel.

"Well," I said, halfway out the door, "it's something to think about."

Spot and I went across the street to my post to wait for the rest of the owl hoots. But they never came. After an hour little Charlie Turnbull thought he heard his mother calling him and went home. After another half hour the Smith boys called it a day, came down off the roof, and went swimming in the Chatham with Leo Scott. They told me that Bunny was just sitting there at the window staring at a point somewhere among the lilacs on McCarter's wall. Russell was still in the rain barrel.

I waited. Later Russell swore he had given the five owl hoots—my signal to go back and distract Bunny again so Russell could get out of the barrel—until he was blue in the face. Either I didn't hear him or I'd already been sent home by that time. My father, who'd been coming to the door of the lockup and looking at me suspiciously every now and again, finally came across the street and said, almost hopefully, "Are you up to some monkeyshines, Ted?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "But I've taken an oath not to tell anybody what." As I said, I was incapable of lying to my father.

"Get home," said my father in a gruff voice to cover his obvious pleasure at having a real hell-raiser for a son. "This'll be the first time I've ever had to give you a strapping."

"Yes, sir," I said, adding a gruff "Get home, Spot" to cover my pleasure at regaining my father's esteem.

All the while Russell was submerged in the barrel breathing through a straw. Each time he came to the surface and peered cautiously over the lip of staves, there was Bunny sitting at the window and staring into the yard, sure to see him if he tried to make a break for it, sure to realize what he'd been up to in the water barrel and, as Russell told us later, "sure to catch me before I got a leg over the fence."

Russell stayed in the water for over two hours, though he didn't know by his wrist watch with the sweep second-hand. He hadn't

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thought to take it off when he slipped into the barrel and rusting had taken over from time-telling at 1:06. Finally, cold and beaten, he dragged his puckered skin from the barrel and broke for the fence. Bunny didn't move.

As a matter of fact, my father, returning home late from the Town Council meeting, said he heard the sound of Bunny's radio coming from the shop. That was past midnight. Perhaps Bunny was still sitting there staring into the darkness of the yard.

I went back a week later for my first fitting. Bunny worked quickly with his radio tuned up loud. I told him things were looking better between my father and myself. I told him I was still interested if he could come up with any sure-fire mischief I could get into around town. I said I'd changed my mind about the double-breasted suit. Bunny's answers were short and disinterested. Twice he left me standing there with an arm outstretched while he fiddled silently with the radio.

The most I got out of him was when I nodded at the wall and said, "Hey, Bunny. Remember, you used to make those rabbit shadows with your hands? How do you do it again?"

"You're a little old for kid stuff like that," he said. But after a moment he brought his hands together in an intricate way and there on the wall was the shadow of a rabbit with big ears and a timid, quivering nose.

I remember thinking that if Bunny could still do that, then maybe some spring when the war was over he might plant muskmelons again. But three years later we moved to Toronto and I don't know if he ever did.

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MURDER UNDERGROUND

by HUGH PENTECOST

(*continued from page 38*)

Wingate sat behind the desk in the office at the back of his store, staring at Gary and Joyce, his watery gray eyes unfriendly.

"*You* say you timed it, Mr. Slade?" The emphasis was insulting.

"Yes."

"And yet Ben wasn't a novice. He wouldn't have lit a short fuse."

"But—"

"*You* say it was set up for him to die down there—that it's murder?"

"Yes." Gary was fighting his temper.

"Let's say you're right for a minute, Mr. Slade. But Ben Martin wasn't the shot firer. Stanley Harris was the shot firer. It was only by accident that Stanley Harris wasn't the one killed."

"Was it an accident?"

"Have you talked to Harris?" Wingate asked.

"He hadn't turned up when I came here. It looks as if he suspected Luke Lamar might have gone to see his wife and took a powder to find out."

"It *looks* that way," Wingate said. "But you don't know?"

"Let's get something straight, Wingate," Gary said. "You are the law in Sheridan. You said to come to you with evidence. I tell you that there have been two murders in this town in the last thirty-six hours—Porlescue and Ben. Both of them were booby-trapped in that mine. It's your job to investigate."

"You say it's murder," Wingate said. "I've lived in a coal town all my life. This kind of thing has happened before. Give me evidence of a crime and I'll investigate. Until you do, *I* say it was an accident—both were accidents. Until you bring me evidence."

"There are the State Police in Millwood," Joyce whispered to Gary.

"Yes, ma'am, there are the State Police in Millwood," Wingate said. "They'll tell you the same thing. Put forward some evidence—and they'll investigate."

"I timed that shot," Gary said. "Isn't that evidence?"

"It's evidence that something went wrong," Wingate said. "It isn't evidence of murder. Unfortunately, there's no way to check below-ground. Tell me, Slade, have you ever been at this mine before?"

"No!"

"But you timed the blast—you're suddenly an expert witness!"

"You don't have to be an expert to tell time," Gary said. "You don't have to be an expert to know how

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long it takes five feet of fuse to burn when you know it burns at the rate of a foot every forty seconds."

Wingate stood up. "I guess you feel bad about this," he said. "We all feel bad. You lost a friend. Everyone else in town has lost a way of making a living. That goes for me. No work, nobody buys anything in my store. We all feel bad. But you're talking wild, Slade. You're talking murder, and there isn't a jot or tittle of evidence to back you up. There's the second hand of your watch, which you might have misread."

"I'll be back," Gary said. "Come on, Joyce."

On the deserted street Joyce closed her fingers over Gary's arm. "You didn't tell him about the car that tried to run you down."

"*You* say the car tried to run you down," Gary said, in a bitter imitation of Wingate. "What kind of car was it? Who drove it? Grass stains on your suit? Hardly evidence, Mr. Slade . . . I'm stymied every time!"

"It's mostly his attitude," Joyce said ruefully. "There *isn't* any evidence you can present. The timing only shows that something went wrong. That's true, isn't it? Isn't it, Gary?"

"Will you drive me back to the farm?" Gary asked. "There's something I want to get."

"Of course."

They got into her car, which was parked in front of Wingate's, and started toward the intersection. Gary slumped low in the seat.

"So we haven't got evidence," he said. "But we've got a trail to follow to find it—a broad trail. One: We believe Porlescue was booby-trapped. Someone had to go down into the mine at night to do that—someone who knew the mine. Okay, it's laborious—but we check alibis. That's the first step."

He began counting off on his fingers. "Two: Mrs. Porlescue knows something but is afraid to talk. She must be made unafraid. Three: Who tried to run me down? Again a matter of alibis. Four: Where is Stanley Harris and why wasn't he on hand to fire his shots? Five: Where did Luke Lamar go? Was he really sick? Six: Who had a motive for wanting Ben out of the way? . . . Does that sound like enough leads to follow?"

"Maybe I can help with Mrs. Porlescue," Joyce said.

"You stay out of it," Gary said. "I have a hunch this is going to be rough."

"Don't be silly. Mrs. Porlescue might talk to me . . . Why are we going back here to the farm, Gary?"

His mouth tightened. "I have a gun in the suitcase in my closet," he said.

"Gary!"

"This whole thing smells of conspiracy," he said. "If we're right, then Stanley Harris was lured away from his job so Ben would take over. That involved Luke Lamar. But Luke Lamar couldn't have rigged anything in the mine. He

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wasn't there. So right away we're faced with the idea that more than one person knew what was coming.

"Why does Wingate fight the idea? He's right. We haven't the evidence we need yet. *But he fights the idea!* Why did Doc Maguire treat me as though he thought I'd had a relapse? Why didn't a single one of the miners come forward with a suggestion as to what happened down there? Maybe we're fighting the whole town, Joyce! Why? What's at stake?"

The car pulled up in the farmhouse yard and they got out.

"I'll make some hot coffee," Joyce said, as they went in.

To the left of the front door was a seldom-used sitting room. At the right was a smaller room that Ben had used as an office. As they started back toward the kitchen Gary noticed that the office door was open.

"Joyce!"

The room looked as if a cyclone had hit it. Every drawer of Ben's desk had been pulled out and the contents dumped on the floor. Letters and papers were tossed about in wild disorder. Two cardboard correspondence files had been literally ripped apart.

Gary and Joyce stood in the doorway, staring at the wreckage.

"Ben had the answer here," Gary said softly. "Or the murderer thought he had. No way of telling if he found what he was looking for."

"Oh, Gary, if we'd come back here instead of going to Wingate!"

He shrugged. "It may have happened before—while we were all at the mine."

"Then it couldn't have been one of the miners."

"It could have been Luke Lamar," Gary said. "Heat that coffee."

He went upstairs to his room, to the closet where he kept his suitcase. The flat automatic felt cool in the palm of his hand.

Stanley Harris sat at the plain wooden table in the kitchen of his house, sprawled forward, his face buried in his arms. The kitchen and the tiny living room spoke of Louella. Cushions in bright, cheap colors; an autographed picture of a movie star on the mantel; a Teddy bear with a dirty red ribbon round his neck; knickknacks that had come from carnivals or bingo.

Gary stood by Stanley, looking down at the empty bottle of cheap whiskey on the table. It was all explained by a scrawled note that had drifted down to the floor:

"I'm going on a party. I don't know when I'll be back. Louella."

Gary turned to Joyce, who stood in the doorway. "Coffee again," he said. "Black and strong." He took Stanley by the shoulder and shook him. "Harris!"

Stanley groaned and his head lolled to one side. Gary went to the sink and filled a pot with cold water. He came back to the table and threw it in Stanley's face.

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"Snap out of it," he said. "Come on. Snap out of it."

Stanley gasped for breath and opened his eyes. "Go 'way," he said.

Gary went to the sink for more water.

Joyce came from the kitchen. "There's some already made," she said.

"This one doesn't even know what's happened!" Gary said.

Ten minutes later Stanley knew. He sucked at the scalding coffee, and he listened to what had happened at the mine. "Oh, no—oh, no!" he kept saying, over and over.

"You left your job—you left the mine," Gary said.

Stanley shook his head. "Ben!" he said. "A great guy. Wonderful guy."

Gary slapped him, a hard stinging slap on the side of the face. "You left your job," Gary said. "Why? How did you happen to leave the mine?"

"Louella," Stanley whimpered.

"What about her?"

"She went out with him—with Luke. She left a note—"

"She left the note here," Gary said. "How did you know about it out at the mine?"

"Luke said he was sick—he left early. I knew—I heard."

"You mean you just left your job on the hunch Luke was here with Louella?"

"I heard," Stanley said.

"How did you hear it?"

"I—I heard."

Gary slapped him again. "If you heard, somebody told you. Who told you Luke had come here to see your wife?"

"Don't hit me again," Stanley said. Tears ran down his pale cheeks.

"Then tell me how you heard. Who told you Luke was here?"

"Maybe it was Matt," Stanley said. "He was always kidding me, always rubbing it in. They act as though I'm not alive. 'Beat it, Stanley. We're taking Louella out.' You wouldn't know I was her husband."

"*Was it Matt?* Did he tell you Luke had come over here to take your wife somewhere?"

"Yes, yes! It was Matt."

"All right. Now, listen to me, Stanley. What could have happened down there to Ben? What could have gone wrong?"

"Maybe—maybe he was too slow."

"It was only two minutes from the time he started down on the hoist till the first explosion—and he had five feet of fuse."

"You don't need five feet," Stanley said. "Three is enough." His head began to wobble again.

Gary took out his handkerchief and wiped his perspiring face. "There's no use trying to get any more out of him now."

They walked out onto the street again. From down the way they could hear the blaring of the Red Apple's juke box. The sun had gone down and the last gray light of day

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was fading out. They started toward the car. Just before they reached it they heard someone call Gary's name. It was McBane, the Scotch miner.

"Have you got a minute, Mr. Slade?"

"If it's important," Gary said.

"If there was some place we could talk—"

"Miss Perry's car. Get in."

McBane got in the back seat of the car, and sat there uneasily. "They're saying around town you're calling it murder, Mr. Slade."

"Are they?"

"That's what they're saying."

"What do you call it, McBane?"

McBane rubbed his chin with the back of his hand. "These things happen where you use black powder," he said.

"If that's what you wanted to tell me, I haven't got time to listen," Gary said.

"Ben Martin was a right guy," McBane said. "I was laid up for about five weeks last year with a strained back. Couldn't do anything heavy. If I didn't work I didn't eat. Ben said there was some kind of insurance he'd taken out. I believed him—I guess because I wanted to believe him. There was enough to cover my needs. Afterwards, I found out there wasn't any insurance—couldn't be. He'd paid it out of his own pocket. I've been paying it back, bit by bit. But you see—I had a reason to like him."

"So?"

McBane twisted in his seat. "Ben had acted as shot firer before, Mr. Slade—when Stanley was off a couple of times. Not only that, he worked in the mine, drilled and loaded his own holes. He knew the routine backwards. If there was anything wrong with the fuse he could have told that at a glance. You understand, the fuse isn't covered by anything—you can see it clear enough. It couldn't have been a short fuse."

"What else, then?"

McBane shook his head. "Understand, if someone did Ben in on purpose I'd fight alongside you."

"Thanks."

"But there's another thing. Let's say someone had it in for Ben—bad enough to kill him. So help me, Mr. Slade, he wouldn't kill him in the mine."

"Why?"

"The mine was a living for every man in this town." He turned his head and nodded toward the Red Apple. "They're drinking over there, most of 'em. You know why? It's the end of the world for them. No place to work tomorrow. No money to get any other place to work. No money to tide them over.

"No, Mr. Slade, they might knife a man in his sleep or club him to death in a back alley or shoot him as he walked home of a night. But they wouldn't destroy the mine to kill him."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"You were Ben's friend, so you're

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my friend," McBane said. "They don't like the talk of murder. They're miners. They don't like the talk that somebody blew up the mine to kill a man. You can't prove anything, Mr. Slade. You can't go down there and find what happened."

"Maybe I won't have to go down there to find out what happened. Tell me something, McBane. There can't be many people who own cars in this town. Can you tell me who they are?"

McBane rubbed his chin again. "Doc Maguire, and Ed Wingate, and Miss Perry here—and Mr. Bradshaw at the bank and the hotel station wagon."

"Just five cars?"

"Oh—and Pete Zeller, who runs the Red Apple."

"Somebody tried to run me down in a car last night, McBane—after I'd gone to talk to Mrs. Porlescue."

"Run you down!" McBane shook his head. "Sure you didn't imagine it? Some of these fellows, when they're tight, drive pretty crazy."

"Well, Maguire wasn't tight, nor Wingate. I'd just left them. Nor Miss Perry."

McBane laughed. "I didn't mean that. But everybody drives Pete Zeller's car. Any of us got to go to Millwood, or maybe just for a ride or something, Pete lends his car. He's real nice that way."

McBane opened the car door and got out. "I just wanted to put you straight, Mr. Slade. No miner would blow up a mine to kill a man. He just wouldn't. But—well, if I can be any use to you—"

"You can tell me where I'll find the Lamar brothers."

McBane's eyes widened. "Lay off them, Mr. Slade. Neither one of 'em would hesitate to bury a pick in your skull, just for the fun of it."

"Is Matt in the Red Apple now?"

"I wouldn't know," McBane said. "I wouldn't know."

Joyce drove her car slowly down the street to a point opposite the Red Apple.

"Wait for me here," Gary said.

"You can't go in there alone, Gary. McBane was right," Joyce said.

"I won't be alone," Gary said, patting the bulge in his coat pocket where the automatic nestled. "Just wait here for me in the car." He smiled faintly. "I might want to leave in a hurry, so don't go window-shopping."

He got out of the car and walked slowly across the street to the Red Apple, his right hand in the pocket of his coat. The Red Apple was jammed. Almost the first person Gary saw was Matt Lamar. He was delivering some kind of oration on what they should all do, now that the mine was gone.

"We start over—that's all," he was saying. "This is coal country. Anywhere you walk there's coal under your feet. We find a new site,

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we sink a new shaft. We don't sit around sucking our thumbs and crying our eyes out. We start tomorrow."

"Yeah, Matt, but where—and how do we get the rights?"

Matt didn't answer. He had seen Gary in the doorway. The voices around Matt died down.

"Hello, Matt," Gary said. "I want to talk to you."

The big man moved slightly so that his back was to the bar. "Okay, mister—talk," he said.

"Where did you go this afternoon after the explosion at the mine?" Gary asked.

Matt's eyes narrowed. "I don't get you."

"It's quite simple," Gary said. He had stopped about three feet from Matt, who towered over him. "After the explosion, where did you go?"

Matt drew a deep breath. "Maybe I ought to speak to you for all of us, mister," he said. There was a mutter of agreement from the others. There wasn't, Gary saw, a single friendly face. "We don't like what you suggested out at the mine. You're saying one of us blew up the place in order to square some grudge with Ben. You're saying one of us put this whole town out of business on purpose—took the food out of people's mouths, just to square a grudge. We don't like that, and we haven't got time to waste on it, mister."

"Where did you go after the explosion?" Gary asked, as though he hadn't heard.

"Maybe you didn't hear me, mister," Matt said.

"I heard you, Lamar. I asked you where you went after the explosion because *someone* went to Ben's house and went through his papers—tore the place apart looking for something. Whatever that person was looking for would probably have shown us the reason Ben was killed. Is that clear? Now—I ask you a simple question: Where did you go after the explosion?"

A dark angry red suffused Matt Lamar's face. "Are you saying that *I'm* the one who killed Ben?"

"I'm being as patient as I know how," Gary said. "I asked you where—"

"He came here with the rest of us," a voice said. It was Evans, one of the checker players. "We all came here together. No one went to Ben's house after the explosion."

"Correction," Gary said. "Someone did go." His eyes moved past Matt to the man behind the bar, whose perspiring bald head glistened in the light from the overhead lamps. "Are you Pete Zeller?"

"So what?"

"Who borrowed your car last night, shortly after dusk?"

"Did someone borrow it?"

"I'm asking you."

Zeller shrugged. "It stood out front of the place. If someone borrowed it, I don't know who it was. I don't keep a book on it."

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"Does anybody here know who borrowed the car?"

There was a dead, resentful silence.

"All right," Gary said. His eyes came back to Matt Lamar. "You told Stanley Harris this afternoon that your brother Luke had quit early in order to keep a date with Stanley's wife."

"Did I?" The cords in Matt's bullneck stood out like lead pencils.

"You told Stanley that because you knew it would drive him crazy and he'd go after Louella."

"Keep talking, mister."

"When Stanley left the job, Ben was the one who'd do the shot firing. He'd done it before. You knew Ben would take over for Stanley. That's why you and Luke fixed it to get Stanley away."

"Why, you—"

Gary took one quick backward step and the gun was in his hand and out in the open. "Where's Luke now?" he asked.

Matt looked at the gun, he was balancing on the balls of his feet, trying to guess whether Gary would use it or not. "You've just accused me and Luke of helping to murder Ben," he said.

"I'm glad you understood it so clearly," Gary said. "Where's Luke?"

Someone laughed. "Wherever he is, that Louella will provide him with an alibi."

Matt's voice was suddenly soft and pleading. "Come on out back with me, mister—just you and me. Come on out back without that cannon and we'll settle things between us."

Out of the corner of his eye Gary saw the man named Evans moving slowly down the bar for a flanking attack.

"All of you, stay in front of me!" he said sharply. "I came here asking for help in catching the murderer of a man who was a friend to all of you. You won't help. That's fine with me." He looked straight at Matt. "If I'm wrong about you and your brother, I'll give you that chance—out back. Meanwhile, I'm keeping this equalizer."

He backed slowly toward the door. "All of you, listen: once I've found the proof against the men who murdered Ben *and* Mike Porlescue, I'll come back. You can have your innings then."

"You better keep moving, mister," Matt said, "because we're coming after you."

Gary was at the door. He turned and went out. Voices rose behind him. He hurried across the street and turned, the gun still in his hand. Matt and the others were at the door of the Red Apple. They stopped their forward surge.

At the same moment Joyce drove up, the curb-side door of the car open, and Gary stepped in. He slammed the door and she stepped down hard on the gas.

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Gary slumped down in the seat.

"Well?" Joyce said.

"A reinforced conviction," he said, "but no evidence."

"What next?"

"Mrs. Porlescue," he said. "But by the back door—and after you've ditched this car somewhere. From here on in this is going to be a game of hide-and-seek."

Joyce knew the back roads around the town. They drove for five or six minutes, then she pulled off the highway onto an old logging road. Ten feet in, the car was hidden by heavy undergrowth.

"It's only a hundred yards or so across the field to the Porlescues'," she said.

"Let's go."

Mrs. Porlescue opened the back door to their knock. She was obviously frightened until she saw who it was, then she let them in. Gary was instantly aware of a change in the woman. Her shoulders weren't drooping; her eyes were shining.

"Mike made no mistake!" Mrs. Porlescue said. The same words, but somehow they were triumphant instead of dull, insistent.

"What's happened, Mrs. Porlescue?"

The story came out slowly, too slowly for Gary's peace of mind. He had a feeling that Matt Lamar and his friends would be looking for him. The Porlescues' might be an obvious place to look. He wanted to hurry the woman, but it came slowly.

The night before his death Mike Porlescue had been feeling bad. "Terrible pain in stomach," Mrs. Porlescue said. "He go see Doc."

"Maguire?"

She nodded. "He gone long time. When he come back he act—scare. He act scare, and he act worried."

"Did he tell you why?"

"No. But I think I know. Doc tell him what bad pain in stomach is. Mike—his father, die like this—from pain which eat up stomach."

"Cancer?"

"I think—yes. I think Doc tell Mike he got this same kind pain. I think this why he scare."

"Go on, Mrs. Porlescue." Gary was listening to her—and listening for sounds from the outside.

"We got small insurance," Mrs. Porlescue said. "I don't understand. Mike laugh—when we get insurance. It say we get no money if he kill himself. We both laugh."

"A suicide clause," Joyce said.

"Then Mike die. I think—I think he do it because of pain. He made it look like accident—so insurance all right. I say to you—Mike made no mistake. But I think maybe he do. Now I know different. Someone kill Mike—like you say. Someone kill Mr. Martin." Her eyes were bright. "Mike made no mistake."

Then, from some distance away, they heard voices; men were calling back and forth to each other. Gary's lips tightened. Matt Lamar and his friends were headed this way—hunting!

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"Is there some place you could take Mrs. Porlescue?" he asked Joyce. "Not your house; not the farm. They might look for her there. Some friend you can trust?"

"I guess so, Gary, but why?"

"If they think she's been talking to me, she may not be safe. Mike Porlescue knew something, Joyce. That's why he died. Can you take her to your friend now?"

"Yes, but—"

"Out the back way, then, quickly! I'll keep them off your trail long enough for you to get across to your car." Gary turned toward the front door.

"Gary! Where will I find you? Where will you be?" Joyce asked.

"In the lap of the gods!"

He walked out onto the porch and closed the door. He could hear Joyce and Mrs. Porlescue go out the back door. He could hear Matt and the men a couple of houses down the street. They were doing a thorough job, circling the houses, looking in front and rear, reporting to one another in loud voices.

Gary knew that the men searching at the back might see Joyce and Mrs. Porlescue in the moonlight. He took a deep breath and walked out into the center of the street. He stood here until, suddenly, one of the men saw him, and shouted the alarm. Seconds later they came toward him on the run.

Gary turned and cut off the road into the brush about twenty yards from Mrs. Porlescue's house.

The brush was thick. Brambles tore at his clothes, his hands, his face. The voices were close behind him now. He could distinguish Matt's, giving orders to spread out and beat their way through the brush.

Gary found a declivity between two stones and crouched there. A wild cherry tree, bent from some winter storm, gave him partial coverage. He waited, trying to keep his breathing as quiet as he could. His right hand was closed over the automatic in his pocket.

Two days ago he had imagined he didn't want to live. He had been thinking only of himself. Now it seemed terribly important to live. He owed that to Ben—and he owed Ben the murderer. Someone was very close—nearly on top of him.

Then a voice shouted, almost in his ear. "No sign of him here, Matt!"

"He's probably headed for the road to the farm!" Matt was yards away. "Let's go."

Gary stayed where he was, his forehead pressed against one of the cool stones. In the distance he heard a car. Joyce and Mrs. Porlescue had made it! He tried, now, to think what his next move should be. One thing was certain: If he didn't know how the disaster had happened at the mine, he couldn't know what to look for.

What could have made that fuse burn faster? What could have turned a safe setup, to Ben's experienced eye, into a deathtrap?

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Only an expert on such matters could hazard a guess, and Gary knew no expert. Stanley Harris was too drunk to talk. The other miners couldn't, or hadn't an idea.

Then Gary remembered the magazine—the shed at the mine where powder, fuse, and carbide for the miners' lamps had been stored. He remembered standing there while Ben had doled out powder and fuse to the miners. There had been cardboard cartons of fuse on the floor, and on those cartons had been the name of the powder company from which they'd been bought.

Gary pulled himself up out of his hiding place and moved slowly on through the woods. The voices of the hunters had faded away in the distance. After about a five-minute walk he came out onto the road that led past the mine to the farmhouse. He was only a couple of hundred yards from the mine site.

Suddenly, in the distance, lights appeared. Matt and the others had reached the farmhouse and were searching it. He'd have a little time before they came back down the road. He hurried across the littered ground to the magazine shed. The door was heavily padlocked.

Gary looked around for something to force the lock. In the wreckage at the head frame he found a twisted piece of iron. A few moments later he was in the magazine.

It was dark. He reached for his cigarette lighter and suddenly realized it wouldn't be safe to strike a flame in here until he could see what he was doing. Somehow he remembered the desk where Ben had stood, making the record of the miners' purchases in a ledger, and he remembered seeing a black-and-chrome flashlight there.

He fumbled his way to the desk, felt around on its surface until he found the flash. He tried it, holding the light down so that it wouldn't shine through the window. The torch worked—and the beam of its light was focused on a box of fuse: *The Franklin Powder Co.*

There had been a phone on the desk. He was sure he remembered a phone. If the afternoon's explosion hadn't destroyed the connection—

"Number, please!"

"I want to get the Franklin Powder Company, in Hartsboro," he said. "I know there won't be anyone in their office now, but I want to get the home phone of the manager, or foreman. No, I don't know his name . . . Please! This is an emergency!"

He waited. Through the window he could see the lighted farmhouse. They must be going over it from top to bottom.

After what seemed an eternity the operator spoke. "I have Mr. Markle, of Franklin Powder, on the wire."

"Mr. Markle?"

"Who is this?"

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"I'm calling from Ben Martin's truck mine in Sheridan."

"Oh, yes."

"We've had an accident here."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"Listen carefully, Mr. Markle: what would make the black-powder fuse you sell burn faster than the forty seconds for a foot it's supposed to burn?"

"Nothing," Markle said flatly.

Gary felt his throat go dry.

"You still there?" Markle's voice was sharp. "That fuse is manufactured under exact conditions—tested—inspected. It has to be, man, *lives* depend on it."

"I—I'm not suggesting a mistake on your end," Gary said. "But if I wanted to make it burn faster—"

"No way," Markle said. "Under normal circumstances."

Gary's heart thumped. "But under abnormal circumstances?"

"Well, if someone was crazy enough to soak fuse in gasoline or alcohol—"

"It would burn faster?"

"Yes."

"How much faster?"

"I don't know. I never tried it. But a lot faster!"

Voices! Voices coming back down the road. Gary snapped off his flash. "Thanks," he said to Markle.

He waited there in the dark. Matt Lamar and his friends were passing along on the road. Someone was saying, "He must have doubled back into town."

"We'd better have a talk with Old Lady Porlescue!"

They were gone. Gary switched on the flash again. The ledger was there on the desk. He remembered how the miners had come in, signed a chit for what they'd needed, the amount to be deducted from their earnings. Ben had written each purchase in the ledger.

Gary ran the light down the page. The fuse came in fifty-foot rolls. The miners bought a roll every twelve or fourteen days. Then he saw what he'd been praying to find: Yesterday Matt Lamar had bought *two* fifty-foot rolls of fuse. The extra roll hadn't been for Luke. Luke's name was there in the ledger with a purchase of his own.

Gary stood in the darkness, thinking. The vague outlines of a pattern were taking place in his mind. Mike Porlescue, taking his stomach ache to Doc Maguire, had seen something that had worried him. He hadn't told Mrs. Porlescue what it was, perhaps because he wasn't sure, himself—perhaps because he felt to mention it to anyone was dangerous.

Suppose Matt Lamar had taken that extra roll of fuse to Maguire? Suppose what Mike Porlescue had seen was some sort of experiment with the fuse? And suppose Maguire, or Matt, had realized he had seen it? The rest was clear. Matt would go down in the mine and booby-trap Porlescue's working

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area. Matt had had the chance to put doctored fuse in today's shooting. Matt had an alibi for the searching of Ben's papers at the farm—but not Luke, and *not* Maguire!

Gary put the flashlight in his coat pocket and left the magazine shed. Maguire's was the next point of approach. Maguire's, where Mike Porlescue had seen something that had cost him his life.

Gary couldn't walk down the main street of the town. Matt Lamar and his crew would still be on the lookout, that was certain. Gary headed for the doctor's, working his way along behind the buildings that faced the street—past the Sheridan House, past Ed Wingate's store, and to the two-car garage at the rear of Maguire's. There were lights on in the doctor's house. A car was in the garage.

Gary walked in and stood there in the dark, in the garage. If Porlescue had come about his stomach ache he couldn't have gone into the house and caught Matt and Maguire at something. Maguire would have been protected in the house, shut away in his consulting room. At least, in the house, he would have been safe from surprise.

But if Porlescue had found no one at home—had come around to the back of the house, thinking Maguire might be doing something in his back yard . . .

Gary switched on the torch, looking—looking for he knew not what. The light suddenly stopped on a flat baking pan that rested on the floor near a far corner. He went over to it, and stood frowning down at it.

It was empty, but something about it held Gary. Finally he bent down and picked it up. The smell was suddenly strong—the smell of gasoline. There had been gasoline in that flat pan!

Gary's pulse was racing. He walked round the garage, flashing the light on the walls, looking for something that would nail his case down for him. Nothing. Then, as he lowered the light, trying to force himself to see a way to turn, the light fell on the concrete floor —on two scorched streaks!

He knelt down. There were tiny pieces of scorched fiber—fiber that might have been the casing of a fuse! So Porlescue *had* seen it!

Gary went to the car, tried to open the trunk. It was locked. If only he could find remnants of the fuse somewhere. He opened the car door and looked for the keys in the ignition switch. Not there. He tried the glove compartment. Sometimes a man left his keys in the—

He stared, not daring to believe what he saw. Neatly curled and lying in plain view—the remains of a roll of black-powder fuse!

Got him—nailed it down! Not a complete case—not the motive—but enough, in certain circumstances . . .

The back door of Maguire's house was unlocked. Noiselessly

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Gary opened it with his left hand. The automatic was in his right. He tiptoed across the kitchen to the swinging door that led into the dining room. The dining room was dark, but beyond was the living room.

Maguire was there, sitting by the center table, reading a magazine by the light of the table lamp. He was in his shirt sleeves, smoking a long thin panatela.

Gary reached the living-room door before Maguire heard him or sensed his presence. He looked up and saw Gary standing there, saw the gun leveled straight at him. He took the cigar out of his mouth, but he didn't speak.

"On your feet," Gary said.

"What is this, son?"

"On your feet! It's all over, Maguire. I don't know why you did it, but I've figured out how—every step of it. And I can prove it, at least to the men to whom it matters. Now, get moving. We're going across the street to the Red Apple."

Maguire rose, shaking his head slowly. "I thought you'd blow your top before this thing was over," he said. But he moved.

As they reached the sidewalk, Gary walking directly behind Maguire with the gun poked in Maguire's fat back, said, "I've got a story to tell these men, Maguire. If they don't give me the chance to tell it, you'll be the first one to go. So you'll help me to persuade them to listen."

"I don't have much choice, do I, son?"

It seemed as if the whole town of Sheridan was in the Red Apple, with the exception of the miserable Stanley Harris. Stanley's wife was there, with Luke Lamar, and Matt and his whole searching party were lined up along the bar. McBane was near the door, talking to Evans and Thomas, the Welshmen.

Somebody saw Gary and Maquire and shouted, "There he is, Matt!"

"Turn off that juke box," Matt ordered. Something in the expression on Maguire's face must have warned him.

"There is a gun in the small of my back, Matt," Maguire said. "Our young friend here has gone quite crazy. But I'd appreciate it if you'd listen to what he has to say. I'd like to go on living if it's all right with you. And you can never tell how itchy a lunatic's finger may be on the trigger of a gun."

Gary drew a deep breath. "I know how Ben Martin died," he said, "and I know who killed him." The crowd murmured. "Listen to me! I don't know why—but I know how, and who. Yesterday Matt Lamar bought an extra roll of fuse."

"Says who?" Matt's voice was an angry rumble.

"It's a matter of record," Gary said. "It's in the ledger at the mine."

"I don't care what's in the ledger. I—"

"You never bought two rolls at

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once before," Gary said. "That's a matter of record, too. You took that extra roll of fuse to Doc Maguire's and you tried an experiment with it in his garage."

"The guy *is* nuts!" Matt said.

"You soaked that fuse in gasoline," Gary said. "The baking pan you filled with gasoline is still there. Then you lit the fuse—to see how much faster it burned. The scorch marks are there on the floor of the garage. The ashes of the fuse casing are there. While you were doing it, Mike Porlescue came to consult Maguire professionally. Maguire wasn't in the house, and Mike went around back, looking for him. He saw you two burning the fuse."

"How could he see us," Matt shouted, "when we weren't there?"

Gary paid no attention. "You must have seen him as he went away. He couldn't figure out what you were doing, but it worried him. You knew that if something happened to Ben—as you planned to have it happen—Mike would remember what he'd seen and would talk. So Matt—or Luke—booby-trapped his working space in the night, and Mike died."

"Hey, leave me out of this!" Luke Lamar said.

For an instant Gary glanced at his dark face. Louella Harris, standing beside him, was evidently frightened, her lipstick a bright gash on a pale face.

"Listen!" Gary said. "Today Luke Lamar pretended to be sick, but actually he went to see Louella Harris and took her out. Matt made sure Stanley knew about it, and Stanley left the job to find his wife."

"Sure, I told Stanley!" Matt said. "I was always kidding him about Luke and Louella. But—"

"When you got Stanley away from the mine, Matt, that made Ben the shot firer. You knew it would. He'd always done it before when Stanley was missing. So then you, Matt, used some of the doctored fuse on one of the shots. And Ben died—because the fuse burned faster than it should, much faster. That's how Mike and Ben died. And it was the Lamar brothers and Maguire who murdered them."

"The whole thing is a cockeyed lie," Matt shouted.

"And no real evidence," Maguire said quietly.

"No?" Gary's voice was triumphant. "The remains of the fuse you experimented with, Doc. It's here—in my pocket. I found it in the glove compartment of your car."

Maguire's head jerked around. "*My* car?"

"That's right. In the glove compartment of your green coupe."

Something happened to the faces of the men confronting him. Gary felt his muscles tense. It wasn't belief. They were looking at something *behind him!*

"You'd better drop that gun, Slade," a harsh voice said. It was Ed Wingate, the sheriff.

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A slow smile of triumph spread over Matt Lamar's face. "You'd better do what he says, Slade. He's got you covered with a sawed-off shotgun."

Gary felt the strength oozing out of him. "I've finished," he said. "You've all heard it. You can check on what I've told you."

He took the gun out of Maguire's back and dropped it on the floor.

"Kick it over to one side," Wingate ordered.

Gary slid the gun away from him with the toe of his shoe. He saw Evans, one of the Welshmen, pick it up. Maguire let out a deep sigh of relief and turned. Gary saw Wingate now, holding the shotgun steadily.

"I warned you to stay out of this," Wingate said. "You got a license to carry that gun in the State of Indiana?"

"No," Gary said, "but I—I've got the evidence you told me to present. And if you put the heat on Maguire you'll find out why he searched Ben's papers—what was there that would have given him away."

"I heard your evidence," Wingate said dryly. "We'll check on it. Meanwhile, I'm taking you to the county jail in Millwood. I'm not having any lunatics running around this town trying to frame people. Now, come on. You're going with me in my car."

Maguire had struck a match and was holding it to the end of his cigar. "I wouldn't go if I was you, son," he said quietly. "Gun or no gun. You'll never get to Millwood. You'll be shot for trying to escape."

The Red Apple was suddenly as silent as a tomb.

"Evans, take my advice and hold that gun on Matt Lamar," Maguire said. Something in his tone made the Welsh checker player obey. He raised Gary's automatic so that it covered Matt.

"I wasn't in the garage last night making any experiments with Matt," Maguire said. "I was in Millwood delivering Mrs. Cassidy's baby at the hospital. That was a guess you made, son, and it was a wrong one. And my car isn't in the garage now. I burned out a bearing on it and it's at the service station being fixed. In fact, I don't own a green coupe.

"You see, son, I share that garage with the sheriff. So I'd take a chance, if I were you, and see if he'll shoot you here, in front of witnesses. Because otherwise you'll certainly die between here and Millwood."

Without turning his head, Gary realized that someone was moving, inch by inch, down the bar. Wingate's face was a study. Naturally gray in color, it had turned a putty-white.

Maguire's voice went on, quietly, "Mike Porlescue didn't find me because I was in Millwood, but he must have seen Matt and Ed." He made a clucking noise with his tongue. "You always were a penny-

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pincher, Ed. If you hadn't been you'd have thrown away the rest of that fuse. But I guess if you hadn't loved money so much, you wouldn't be in this.

"You see, son, I think I can tell you why Ed went through Ben's papers at the farm. I know for a fact he'd made Ben half a dozen offers for the farm—wrote to him while he was still in the Army. He probably wanted to destroy the offers he put in writing. Ed wanted to own what was left of Sheridan. He *does* own most of it—*and* the mineral rights to the land. But no one was going to work another mine while Ben's place was paying off. You can't get new miners to come to a ghost town like this. He tried to get the land on the level, and when Ben wouldn't sell—"

Maguire let it rest there.

"You'll be well advised not to move, Matt," the Welsh miner said sharply.

Eyes turned toward Matt. The bluster seemed to have left him like air escaping from a balloon. His voice was pleading. "I swear you've got this all wrong," he said. "Luke and I had nothing to do with any of this. I never bought an extra roll of fuse."

"If it's in the ledger," Maguire said, "it's—"

"Forget about the ledger," Matt said. "Listen. Yesterday Ben was working with Teliski to fix something on the hoist when we went to get our powder and fuse. Stanley Harris was at the magazine. He must have made a mistake. Get him. Ask him. He'll tell you I never bought an extra roll of fuse. He must have put it down in the book wrong."

McBane, standing near the door, said, "That's easy to check. I'll get Stanley. He *was* on the ledger at the magazine yesterday."

"No!" It was Louella Harris, her voice shrill. "Don't let him go! He'll kill Stanley. It's him, not Matt!"

McBane started to run for the door. It was Gary's automatic in Evans' hand that brought McBane down just before he reached the door. It was Thomas, the other Welshman, who, in the confusion jumped Wingate and wrenched the shotgun out of his hands.

"Now, let's get this straight," Maguire said.

Gary stood by, feeling dazed, as Louella Harris told her story, the words edged with a kind of desparing bitterness.

"You might as well know it all," she said. "Wingate will talk sooner or later to save his hide—the rat!" She drew a deep breath. "I hate this town. I always hated it. I guess everyone knew it, except Stanley. At least, he wouldn't do anything about it. Maybe he couldn't. It wasn't in him to make a change. The world is too tough a place for Stanley. So, to keep from dying of boredom, I played around—with Luke,

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or anyone else who seemed like fun. I—I guess Wingate was shrewd enough to see I was ripe for anything that would get me out of here."

"He came to you?" Maguire asked.

Louella nodded. "He said if I'd help to get Stanley away from the mine at just the right time, there'd be money enough for me to get out of here and start fresh somewhere else. It would be easy enough. If he thought I was going somewhere with Luke—" She shrugged.

"Did you know why he wanted Stanley away?"

"I found out, later. Things went wrong. That's when I learned McBane was in on the act. He came to me and told me they were in trouble. Mike Porlescue had seen something and they'd have to deal with him. I made him tell me what it was all about. I told him I wouldn't help unless he did."

Maguire's voice was hard. "He told you they planned to kill Ben Martin?"

She didn't look at the doctor. "Yes—and frame the Lamar brothers."

An angry rumble sounded in Matt Lamar's dry throat.

"It was McBane who bought that extra roll of fuse and told Stanley it was for Matt and to mark it down against his account in the ledger. That's why I had to stop him now. He'd have come back and told us Stanley'd killed himself. He'd have shut Stanley up. Poor Stanley. He's had it rough enough."

"Luke didn't know that you were using him?"

Louella's lips curled. "The poor sap had a terrible case on me." For the first time she looked straight at Maguire. "Maybe I'm not *your* type, Doc, but there are plenty of guys who find me attractive."

"So you and McBane were going to share in what Wingate made out of the deal?" Maguire said.

"Sure. Wingate hadn't been able to buy the property from Ben. Naturally, he couldn't get anyone interested in sinking a new mine somewhere else as long as Ben's place was operating. With Ben dead and his mine out of commission—probably tied up by law—the men would have to sink a new shaft on land Wingate owned the mineral rights to."

She looked around at the men with an expression of disgust. "You'd think they'd move on, wouldn't you? But they won't. They're like Stanley. They'll stay here—they'll sink a new shaft."

Maguire knocked the ash from his cigar. "Wingate never expected any kind of investigation—did you, Ed? And when the major here started in, you had to stop him. That's why you tried to run him down in that car. The trouble was the major was just a little too quick on his feet for you."

"And dead wrong," Gary said.

"Dead right—the way the evi-

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dence read," Maguire said. "So help me, you had me wondering about myself for a few minutes!" He turned to Matt. "You fellows hang onto Wingate and his friends while I go across to my house and phone the State Police. Come on, Major."

Out on the street Gary paused. He had never been so tired in his life. "I guess I better start thinking about finding myself a new kind of profession."

"Nonsense," Maguire said. "You did a fine job. Only thing, it turned out the shoe would fit more than one foot." Maguire's eyes twinkled. "Now, you come along with me. The troopers will be wanting to talk to you when they get here."

"They'll find me out at the mine," Gary said. A nerve twitched in his cheek. "I'd like to sit with Ben a while. He's all alone out there."

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Reporter detectives aren't new—even drunken reporter detectives aren't new. Yet there's a freshness about McTevick—hic, we mean McKevitt —that you'll like, and a Groucho-like zaniness that age cannot wither. McKevitt has a line o' gab (always excepting the one and only Groucho, and in a different way, some of the Hecht-MacArthur reporters) that could come only out of a bottle—any bottle, you name it; but underneath the harlequin nonsense is the hardest kind of sense . . .

McKEVITT—100 PROOF

by ROBERT TWOHY

ALBIN MCKEVITT OPENED THE DOOR, swayed there, and beamed at the roomful of faces turned toward him. "Greetings and salu . . . greetings and felic . . . greetings and all that," he said. "Hic."

Detective Lieutenant Throop, nearest the door, was the first to break the silence in the room. "Sweet mother of us all," he whispered.

His partner, Sergeant Lavalier, burly and scowling, roared, "What are you doing here?"

"Newspapering," said McKevitt. "I got a news for nose—a nose for news."

"You got a rose for a nose," said Lavalier. "You got a berled rutabaga for a nose. Why aren't you in some low dive somewhere, getting tanked?"

"I was," said McKevitt. "I was, as a matterfack, in the Blue Goose Room down the street, when I saw a car belonging to my good friend here, Doctor Whatsisname, the Coroner's man, pull up in front of this apartment. You don't have to hit *me* over the head with a murder. Who's the customer, Doc?"

The thin, balding, elderly man who was kneeling over something near the door glanced up and muttered something. McKevitt was swaying in front of one of the members of the police photography unit, who was adjusting some equipment. "Are you the victim?" he inquired courteously.

The policeman grinned. "Not me, McKevitt."

"This thin chap here?"

"That's a tripod."

Throop rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Heavens to Betsy," he muttered. "What is more outré than a drunken newspaperman?"

"Catch up with the times, McKevitt," burly, crag-faced Sergeant Lavalier shouted. "Newspapering isn't done by drunken comedians any more. Stop being a relict."

"I beg your pardon." McKevitt

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bowed from the waist. He would have continued his bow down to the floor had not the nearest policeman caught him and straightened him up. McKevitt took off his hat and said, "Thank you, my boy," bowed again, toppled again, and was uprighted again. "Perhaps I should lie down," he said. "This ship seems to be springing a leak."

He sighted the object on the floor over which the Coroner's man was kneeling. "I say, is that the guest of honor?" He walked a crooked line to the Coroner's man and bent to peer at the man lying on his back on the floor. "Is that a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead?"

"It is."

"Neatly placed," McKevitt remarked.

Lavalier bellowed, "Get out of here, McKevitt!"

"Not so fast, there, Lambert, not so fa-a-ast." McKevitt waggled a finger in front of Lavalier's short pugnacious nose. "I represent the people of this great West Coast metropolis, and if you throw the representative of the people out of this room . . ."

McKevitt's drifting eye registered a dark-haired, tastefully dressed girl sitting on a red couch across the room. He beamed. "The party's looking better by the minute." He started to navigate the room toward her.

His way was blocked by the long thin form of Lieutenant Throop. "Mr. McKevitt," said the Lieutenant, "we are trying to conduct a homicide investigation here. I was in the act of interrogating the witnesses when you arrived. Would it be asking too much of you to allow us to proceed?"

"Not at all, old chap. Is that a cigar I perceive in your bosom pocket?" He plucked it out, passed it under his nose, sniffing, and beamed at Throop. "A man of taste, discernment, and good cigars. I like such a man."

He wandered toward a wall against which was leaning a short muscular man of 30, who wore a white undershirt, wrinkled brown slacks, and slippers. He had dark wiry hair and a smooth pale face. McKevitt bowed. "I don't think we've been introduced, officer."

The man scowled. "I'm not a cop. My name's Paul Lockley. This is my apartment."

"Ah, you're the host. Nice party you're running, though I can't understand why you invited all these harness bulls. But the two lovelies on the couch there are charming. Or is it one lovely I see twice? No, it's two lovelies. You're a red-headed lovely, aren't you, love? What's your name?"

The buxom red-haired girl was very pale, and her lipstick stood out in startling contrast. She gave McKevitt a brittle smile. "Katherine Farrell. I'm the widow."

"The widow?"

"Yes. The gentleman on the floor is my late husband."

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Lieutenant Throop said, "Mr. McKevitt, you know I try to cooperate with the Press. How about cooperating with me for a change?"

"By all means. I shall make some notes." McKevitt found a chair near the couch, fell into it, and beamed at the two young women on the couch. He fished a scrap of paper from his pocket, then an inch of pencil which he began to sharpen with a thumbnail.

Throop frowned at the dark young man leaning against the wall. "I was asking you something, Mr. Lockley . . . oh, yes. Your occupation?"

"I'm a salesman. I'm between jobs right now."

"And this is your gun?" The Lieutenant nodded toward a gun lying on a table by the couch. It was a .32.

"Yes."

"And you state that Mrs. Farrell used this gun to shoot her husband?"

Lockley frowned. "I was in the other room, asleep. I didn't actually see it.

Mrs. Farrell said, "It's true. I used it to shoot my husband."

Throop turned to her. "And you claim you shot him in self-defense? That your husband was trying to kill you?"

The dark-haired girl said, "I'll vouch for Kate. I saw it all. It was self-defense. He shot first."

McKevitt had been struggling with his stub of a pencil and now it suddenly split, the pieces falling on the floor. He said, "The hell with it. I'm in no shape to write anyway." He wadded the paper in his fist. "What's *your* name, Princess?"

"Beth Diamond. I'm a friend of Kate's. I'm a singer. I work at the Vagabond Trails, on Post Street."

McKevitt nodded enthusiastically. "Delightful place. I've never been there."

The Coroner's man said, "Do you want my report, Lieutenant?"

"By all means, young fellow, give us your report," said McKevitt. He beamed at the Coroner's man, fished in his pocket, and apparently thinking the cigar was a pen, began to write on his wad of paper with it.

Beth Diamond smothered a laugh.

"This is a hell of a way to make a cigar," said McKevitt; he threw it on the floor and stepped on it. "Throop, when are you going to get some decent cigars?"

"The victim," said the Coroner's man, "died instantaneously of a gunshot wound in the center of the forehead. Bullet took an upward course. Victim died an hour ago, more or less—8:00 to 8:30."

McKevitt muttered to Beth Diamond, "I was eating pickled pig's feet at the time. It's a small world."

"No powder marks around the wound," said the Coroner's man. "Bullet is still lodged in the cranium."

Throop said, "Thanks, Doctor." He nodded to the two men who

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hovered near the body with a stretcher. "I'm through with him. Are you through with him, boys?"

The photography crew said that they were through with him.

McKevitt said to Kate Farrell, "Are you through with him?"

She gave him a cold smile.

He said, "Well, I'm not through with him." He pushed to his feet and staggered to the body. He saw a small, stout, pink-cheeked man of middle age, wearing a new gray overcoat buttoned to the collar, brown pants, and brown shoes. Horn-rimmed glasses fitted over the short nose. A gray hat lay nearby. In the fingers of his outflung right hand was a .38.

"I'd like to know," McKevitt said, "why he's all bundled up, in a new overcoat on a warm evening."

Throop rubbed his long white jaw with a knuckle. "It's a peculiar point. I'll grant you that, Mr. McKevitt."

McKevitt looked at Kate Farrell. "Here's another peculiar point. What's a delightful bundle like you doing married to the likes of him?"

"You shouldn't speak disrespectful of the dead," Sergeant Lavalier rumbled. "What's the matter with you, anyway, McKevitt?"

"Many things, my boy, that are not known to your philosophy. Well, love?"

"Security," she said. "I admit it. He has—*had*—money. He operates a loan agency downtown. I got a job there as a secretary two years ago, and—well, things took their natural course."

"Wealthy loan-shark, hey? And you inherit, I suppose. All right, everything's in order. Proceed, Throop."

The Lieutenant paced, his long thin white fingers laced behind his back. The stretcher bearers had departed with their burden and the photography men were also gone. Left in the room now were Throop, Lavalier, the two women, Lockley, and McKevitt. It seemed considerably emptier.

McKevitt, glancing about, was able to notice things he had not noticed before: a stool with a record player on it and a shattered lamp on the floor under the table on which lay the .32. Light in the room was provided by an overhead fixture. In the far wall was a window, with the Venetian blind drawn; four closely grouped holes could be seen in the white slats, high up near the ceiling. A closed door to the right apparently led to a bedroom; another door near the front door apparently opened into a coat closet.

Lieutenant Throop said, "This appears to be a case of justifiable homicide, Mr. McKevitt." He pointed to the .38 in the outflung hand of the deceased. "Mr. Farrell came bursting into the room waving that and then he started shooting at his wife."

"Why?"

"Apparently in jealousy, in a murderous frenzy. Driven out of

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his mind, because she had—um—recently moved in here with Lockley."

"Moved in? You mean she was shacking up with Lockley?"

"Well, I suppose you could put it that way."

"Not in my paper, I couldn't. I'm surprised at you for suggesting it." He stared at Throop severely. Then his eyes turned to Kate Farrell. "And how long had this shabby situation been going on?"

She shrugged. "Three days."

"Three glorious days, and nights . . . And tonight it all came to a shocking, crashing finale, a bullet-stitched, row-de-dow culmination . . . He followed you here?"

"He found out somehow where I was. I'd left him a note, telling him I couldn't stand his cruelty, his insane jealousy any longer—but I didn't tell him where I'd gone. I knew his jealous furies."

"Well, he's cured of them."

Lockley said angrily, "I find your humor pretty heavy."

"Stick around, it gets downright elephantine. And what were *you* doing while your paramour and the late cuckold were having their shoot-out?"

Lockley said, "Officer, do I have to put up with this insolent drunk?"

"What's so bad about me? I'm no worse than any other insolent drunk. Just answer the question, junior."

"I've nothing to hide. I've already told the officers. I don't see why I have to tell you."

"I don't either," said Sergeant Lavalier. "And I don't see why the forces of law and order in this city have to play second fiddle to a broken-down smarty-pants."

"Now, Lambert," said Lieutenant Throop. "He is the Press."

"Sometimes I think you baby the newspapers too much, Lieutenant."

"You can't baby the Press too much," sighed Throop.

"Words of wisdom," said McKevitt. "Is it mere coincidence that he's a Lieutenant, and you're a Sergeant? I leave you with the thought . . . Come, come, Lockley, what's the answer? And while we're at it, what was the question?"

Throop said, "The question was, what was he doing while the shooting was going on? The answer he gave me is that he was sleeping in the bedroom there, with the door shut. As a matter of fact, he states that he had passed out from liquor several hours before."

Lockley nodded. "I've been out of a job. I get nervous sometimes. I drink a little too much in the afternoon. Kate was bringing this friend of hers, Beth here, to meet me, and I got a little nervous. I started drinking about four o'clock, got rocky, passed out on my bed in there about six. I didn't wake up until the two girls were bending over me, shaking me and telling me George Farrell had come here and got shot."

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"Did you burst into tears?"

Lockley's pale face went red. "For two cents I'd—"

"You'd what?" McKevitt rose, swaying. He took a handful of coins from his pocket. "Two cents, hey? All right, tough guy, I'll call that bluff. Two cents, hey? Hmm. Say, you don't have change for a quarter, do you?"

"Sit down, McKevitt!" Lavalier roared.

"All right. But let's stick to the subject. What did you do when the girls woke you?"

"Came in here. I've been in here ever since."

"I see a broken lamp there. Who broke it?"

"I did," said Kate Farrell.

"You shoot people, you smash lamps—is there no end to your heedlessness? Why, my dear, why?"

"To save my life." She turned to the dark-haired girl. "You tell it, Beth."

Beth said, "I was sitting in the chair where you're sitting, and Kate was sitting on the couch here. Mr. Lockley was in the bedroom there, asleep. I'd come here about 8:30. We were supposed to go out to dinner, Kate and Mr. Lockley and I—she'd come to see me at the Vagabond Trails last night to talk over her problem.

"She told me that she'd left her husband and gone to live with Mr. Lockley. She wanted me to meet him. She said to come promptly at 8:30, as Mr. Lockley would make a dinner reservation . . . But as I say, he'd fallen asleep by the time I got here, and the dinner was off. Kate felt bad about it. We were having a drink and listening to the record player when suddenly I saw Kate go white. She stood up. I turned and saw this man standing there, in the doorway, with a gun in his hand. He said, in a wild voice, 'I'm going to kill you, Kate!' I was frozen with horror."

"Did you know it was her husband?"

"No, I'd never met George Farrell. I've known Kate casually for some years—we were in high school together. But I'd never met her husband."

"Go on."

"Kate started to back away, towards the table there. He waved the gun at me, motioning me back. Kate was backing up, and I kept backing—"

McKevitt put his hands to his head. "All this motion—let's everyone stop backing. What happened then?"

"Suddenly there was blackness."

"I was against this table here," said Kate Farrell. "The lamp was on the table. I didn't think of anything, or plan anything. I just swung my arm and knocked the lamp off the table."

Beth said, "I heard a terrible crash. It was deafening. I've never heard such noise. I saw two flashes from his gun. I dropped to the floor, covering my face. The crashing

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went on, it seemed a long time. Then there was silence. Then I heard Kate's voice say, 'Are you all right, Beth?' I managed to say I was. Then she said, 'I think I shot him.'

"There wasn't any sound from the side of the room her husband was on. Then she switched on the overhead light. We saw him lying there, the gun by his hand. He was dead."

McKevitt gazed at Kate. "Where'd you get the gun?"

"I knew Paul kept it in the drawer there." She turned to indicate the drawer of the table. "I remembered it as soon as I knocked over the lamp. I dropped to my knees, pulled open the drawer, and got the gun. I didn't really know what I was doing. All I knew was that he was shooting at me, trying to kill me. I thought that if I fired too, it might scare him back to his senses. I had no thought I'd hit him."

"You did real good," McKevitt said admiringly. "How many shots did you fire?"

"Four, five—I don't really know. I was just kneeling there on the floor and shooting."

McKevitt got up, walked across the room, and stood still, studying a pattern of bullet holes in the wall near the front door, high up. "Four. Total of five. Plus four holes in the Venetian blind there, from his gun—a regular guerrilla war."

He wandered across the room toward the closed door of the bedroom. He opened it. The bedroom had twin beds, one of them with the coverlet pushed back and the pillow rumpled. A small table stood between the beds, on which was a whiskey bottle about three-quarters gone and a glass.

McKevitt sniffed at the glass, picked up the whiskey bottle, studied it with interest, and drank from it. He went across the room to the wardrobe and fingered some of the clothes there. He began to whistle in a singularly unmusical fashion.

He opened a door at the other end of the bedroom, and entered a bathroom. A small simulated-leather white plastic hamper was in a corner. He opened it, peered in at rumpled towels, shrugged, and closed it. He turned to the washstand. A shaving brush was on the glass shelf. He picked it up and shook a few drops of water from it. He put it back.

He came back into the bedroom, picked up the bottle again, and killed it. Then he walked back into the living room, looking red-faced and cheerful.

Lieutenant Throop said, "Are you through, Mr. McKevitt? Have you enough for your story?"

"Yes. Where's the phone?"

Lockley rasped, "You make yourself at home, don't you?"

Kate said, "Oh, forget it. There's the phone." She nodded to a sideboard.

Lockley, with an irritated grimace, lit a cigarette and dropped

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into a chair. Throop and Lavalier watched McKevitt. There was an anxious look in Throop's eye. McKevitt had an alarmingly bright tone in his voice.

"Hello, Walter? How are you, dear boy? Oh, I've been spending a delightful evening with some charming people . . . I've been to a murder. Uh huh . . . Ready? Here goes.—A murder that was rigged to look like justifiable homicide exploded in the faces of two prominent local persons tonight. In one of the most bizarre plots of recent years Paul Lockley, age 30, well-known sales engineer, and Katherine Farrell, gorgeous bosomy red-haired wife of wealthy loan executive George Farrell, were arrested for the murder of the latter in Lockley's swank mid-town apartment . . . All right, speed it up." He began his tuneless whistling.

Lockley said, "What—what—"

Kate Farrell said, "Why—why—"

Lavalier exploded, "McKevitt, what the hell are you saying?"

"Quiet." The reporter looked at them severely. "Ready, Walter? Okay. Second paragraph—The plot involved a fantastic masquerade in which Lockley impersonated George Farrell, acting out a charade in front of Miss Beth Diamond, beauteous local torch singer, leading her to give an eyewitness account to police that would have exonerated the two plotters on grounds of self-defense. Miss Diamond, an innocent dupe—"

"Innocent dupe!"

"That's right, Princess. No, not you, Walter. I didn't call *you* Princess. There's a lot of static here." McKevitt glanced at Lieutenant Throop who, with a grim look on his face, was striding toward him. "The plot," the reporter said quickly, "was uncovered by Lieutenant Parnell Throop of the Homicide Bureau who was not taken in despite the apparent open-and-shut nature of the case. Throop, who has become famous in local police circles for his deductive skill, unraveled the tangled threads so that the skeleton of the whole scheme was laid bare for all to see."

Throop had stopped, and was observing McKevitt dubiously.

"Also on hand," McKevitt went on, "was Sergeant Lambert Lavalier who rendered assistance, of a sort."

Lavalier roared, "McKevitt!"

"Hush," said Lieutenant Throop. "Let him finish his work."

Kate Farrell screamed, "It's libel! If that gets into print I'll sue you for libel!"

"Ready, Walter? . . . Mrs. Farrell, screaming libel at this reporter, was wrestled to the floor by Sergeant Lavalier who clapped handcuffs on her and led her raging from the scene of the murder."

"I never did that," said Lavalier. "I don't wrestle with women."

". . . Right, Walter. I'll call in more details as they shape up."

He cradled the receiver and

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fished for a cigarette. "Rather a snappy opener, wouldn't you say? Hits you right in the eye."

"You character assassin!" Kate Farrell's face was bright red. She jumped from the couch and made for McKevitt. "You drunken fool! People like you should be—"

"Hold it! Stop! Wrestle her to the floor, Lavalier, like a good guy . . ." Sergeant Lavalier didn't, but he did manage to restrain her. "That's it. Why don't we talk this over like ladies and gentlemen? Anyway, there's some details I'm a little fuzzy on. How'd you like the plug I gave you, Throop?"

"Well, Mr. McKevitt . . . but really, you know, it didn't happen at all like that. It *was* justifiable homicide." Throop looked uncomfortable. "Far be it from me to argue against freedom of the Press, but don't you think there should be *some* small accord with the facts?"

"Oh, they murdered him all right. They plotted it all out. They needed an eyewitness. Beth here was the patsy, as they say in crime circles." He sat down and reached over to pat Beth's knee. "You poor dear, you've had a terrible shock." He patted her knee some more. "You were brought in to watch a masquerade. You were supposed to report what you saw to the police." He continued to pat her knee. "It was supposed to get them off clean."

She said, "I saw what I saw. And stop patting my knee."

"You saw a short stout man in black eyeglasses and wearing a new gray overcoat come in and say something in a strained voice to Kate here, and then start shooting. Next thing you saw was a short stout man in eyeglasses and wearing a new gray overcoat lying dead on the floor. So you thought they were the same man. They weren't. The first one was Paul Lockley."

"But—but he was asleep in the bedroom!"

"Did you see him there? Or did Beth *tell* you he was there?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it.

McKevitt went on, "Lockley equipped himself with two identical gray overcoats. He kept them both here. When Kate left her husband, she brought with her his .38. She called her husband, probably today, told him where she was, and made an appointment for him to come here tonight. He didn't know why he was coming—all he knew was she'd left him, and now she wanted to talk to him. She probably told him to come at eight o'clock sharp. Then she arranged for *you*, Beth dear, to come at *8:30* sharp.

"Farrell came. Paul and Kate had the phonograph on, loud. They probably had a silencer on the gun. We'll scout around for the silencer —Lavalier here is a good man at finding things, when you tell him very carefully what you want found. Anyway, when Kate let

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George Farrell in, Lockley was kneeling across the room, by the table, with his own gun, his .32—and he plugged George smack in the middle of the forehead."

Lockley said hoarsely, "Not true! I *didn't* shoot him!"

"Oh, come, no need for modesty now!—After Farrell was shot, they took one of their new gray overcoats and put it on him, buttoning it all the way up to hide his other clothes, and his shape. They took off his hat. They dragged him to that closet there, near the front door, and bundled him in, propping him against the inside of the door, and pushing it shut on him, so that when it was opened he'd come tumbling out into the room here.

"Then Lockley put on the horn-rimmed glasses he had purchased that were just like Farrell's, put on the other gray overcoat, buttoned it up, and put on Farrell's gray hat. He'd already gotten his bedroom ready, with the bed rumpled and the nearly empty liquor bottle on the bedside table. He went out of the apartment and waited in the stairwell. Did I mention that he had put his own gun, the .32—the one he'd killed Farrell with—in the drawer of the table by the couch?"

"No," said Throop.

"Well, consider it mentioned. And he had the .38—Farrell's gun that Kate had brought to him when she left Farrell. At 8:30 you, Beth, showed up, on schedule. Lockley waited until Kate had run through the bit about him being passed out in the bedroom, and then, at a signal, probably a particular bar of the record on the record player, he made his entrance. Then out goes the light and the gunfire starts.

"They both fired very high, of course. Lockley got his shots off fast, then opened the closet door, and Farrell's body fell out. He dragged it clear, shut the closet door, wiped the .38 off quickly, pressed it into Farrell's hand, dropped the hat on the floor. Of course he and Kate had rehearsed this, probably a good many times, him dragging her around, practicing and timing his moves. Anyway, it only took seconds.

"Then Lockley slipped along the wall to the bedroom door and let himself into the bedroom. He pulled off the overcoat—which you're bound to find in the bedroom, though not in the wardrobe closet, I've checked that already—and his shoes—which are brown, and you'll find *them* in the wardrobe closet—and tumbled into bed. The horn-rimmed glasses he was wearing will be somewhere in the bedroom too, of course . . . He lay in bed and was waiting there for you, Beth, with Kate, to find him, and help underscore his alibi."

McKevitt began to choke slightly. An alarmed look came into his eyes. "I'm talking too much. I think I'm beginning to sober up. A drink, quick!"

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Beth patted his hand consolingly. "There's liquor in the kitchen. Whiskey or gin?"

"They'll do nicely."

Lockley said slowly, "There's one thing you're wrong on."

"Shut up, Paul!" Kate shouted.

"I won't shut up—It wasn't me who shot Farrell. *She* shot Farrell."

"You're a liar! *You* stood over there and shot George!"

Throop sighed. "That does it."

"Princess, where's that drink?" said McKevitt.

"Coming, lamb," said Beth.

It was four hours later. McKevitt was seated in a rear booth of the Vagabond Trails Club on Post Street with a small glass of gin and a generous glass of beer in front of him. Beth Diamond sat across from him, in her working outfit—a dazzling blue evening gown. She had just finished a torch song, to McKevitt's whistles and leers.

He said, "You're wasting your talent in this dump. Did I tell you I got an in with a big shot on television?"

"Yes, lamb. But how did you know Kate and Lockley were lying?"

"I got a nose for news. That means I can smell a fake. The new overcoat, all buttoned up, smelled fake. The bullets so high up in both walls smelled fake. The shot in the middle of the forehead smelled fake. Most of all, Lockley's beard smelled fake."

"Beard? He didn't have a beard."

"That's right. But he's got dark wiry hair, and probably a dark beard. But he didn't have *any* beard. He was clean-shaven. It looked like he'd just shaved. But he was supposed to have been stoned, passed out, from 6:00 o'clock. Yet his shaving brush was wet—not damp, but wet. Which meant that he'd shaved just a little while ago—probably just before you arrived. So he'd lied about being passed out—which killed his whole story.

"Now, why had he shaved? I saw that Farrell had a smooth, pink, hairless type face. So Lockley had shaved just before the impersonation—he didn't want any five o'clock shadow spoiling the act. They were trying to take care of every detail."

"And the police found the other overcoat under the mattress, the silencer and the horn-rimmed glasses in the bathroom hamper—you're marvelous, you know?"

"Certainly." He took a mammoth helping of gin and beer.

She said, "I don't see how you can chase a glass of gin with beer."

"It's the sport of it. Like tiger hunting. Why does a hunter risk going after a tiger? Because it's a challenge."

He looked at his watch and his face registered alarm. "Let's stop talking. Do you realize the time?"

"Ten minutes to two."

"And this place closes at two. You can't get a drink anywhere

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after two. God, what a city! I wonder why I stay here. Garçon!" He stretched his arm, snapping his fingers madly. "Garçon!" Hey, you, Buster! What do you think we are, a couple of camels? We can't go indefinitely without liquid, you know!"

The drinks came. Beth peered searchingly at McKevitt. "You know, I just can't understand it. How you, in the condition you've been in since you arrived at Lockley's apartment, could have figured out that whole complicated scheme —"

"Nothing to it," he said airily. "I had the advantage. I was stoned to the eyes. You've got to be either stoned or insane to unravel these crazy plots."

She nodded, "You could be right."

She got up suddenly. "Well, McKevitt, the time for decision has come. You have in front of you a shining glass of gin and a beaded schooner of beer. And I'm going home. Immediately. So, which is it going to be? Are you going to stay here with your drinks—or are you going to see me home?"

McKevitt gazed at her standing there—and then at the glasses. He licked his lips. He grinned.

"You put me in mind of a story," he said. "The one about the lady or the tiger."

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John Pierce has what might be called "a poetic approach" to telling a story. He is not direct or straightforward. He does not state so much as he discloses and reveals slowly. But in the end it's as if Mr. Pierce has been as clear and candid as a policeman's report . . .

SOMETHING DAMP AND GREEN

by JOHN PIERCE

CHARLES HENION GLANCED AT THE snapshot and sought a maxim. A few words to live by. Something quiet. He could not afford a stroke at 41. He had worked too hard getting there.

He tossed the snapshot back onto Devereaux's desk and swiveled to face the railroad. Autumn scenery. No, he did not want a coronary or to bite off his lower lip or to take up smoking again.

It wasn't the picture. He knew about his wife and Martin Dugger. It was the idea of Rex Devereaux, his business partner—junior partner—sitting up there on his tiled terrace and taking telephoto pictures of his backyard and his personal life. How go-go was the man? Didn't he know yet what you did and didn't do?

In the photo Sue and Dugger embraced fervently at the Henion back door. So they did. Dugger wasn't the first one, but this time she would seem to have shed her discrimination with her clothes. Dugger. A gum-chewing, silk-suited little peacock with a great billowy hairdo, a salesman of those little backyard swimming pools (free television and storm windows if you *HURRY!!!*).

If Henion could have done it in some dignified manner he supposed he'd have made it a point to nail them, but he commuted to the New York office, and he had a business to run. Rex did the production end here in Coldswich. The line was construction aluminum and they had prospered. They had caste, fancy automobiles, and intervisible $70,000 homes in Maple Hills. They co-entertained customers, drank and hunted together, raced Atlantics in the Sound, and had season boxes for the Giants football games.

All Henion had that Devereaux didn't was Sue, a lithe 29-year-old sometime blonde who tooled a convertible around, wore white-rimmed sunglasses the size of its headlights, and spoke with a BOAC British accent. He'd have packed her up the hill long ago, but where Rex might have once wanted Sue—most men did, briefly—he did not any more.

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Henion, his fingers steepled, thought carefully. This kind of thing got people killed. The 4:16 from New York had swung in and he watched the passengers disembogue from behind the high planking that shielded off construction work. The railroad was building a new ticket office. Ten years ago he'd have bid on that job. Fifteen, he'd have been laying the brick . . . Like roaches, the passengers went scurrying away.

"Now *I* feel like hell," Devereaux said.

You should, thought Henion. He was clasping his hands to choke the anger. God knew how his voice would behave.

"She's making a clown out of you, Charlie. It's all over town. It's gotten to you. I *know* it wouldn't be any of my business, but it's fouling us up, boy. That Afco contract, and the Delta thing—you'd have had those with your left little finger on your better days."

Devereaux found more papers to shuffle about his desk. He pulled the desk calendar to him and pored over its loudest entry, a notice to himself in large block letters. He pushed it away again. "Well, hell, Charlie, I know it's cornball, but there is a positive side."

Henion affected tired mirth. "Is there?"

"There is," Rex said. "Dump her. Get rid of her. Walk in on them and you're out of it scot-free."

"I loathe that kind of thing."

"A lot cheaper than what she'd do to you any time she got ready. And there's another thing. I know Dugger wife's onto it by now—a town this size. You've seen the woman, tracking around here in shorts and cheap mink in mid-July. Let her file suit, naming Sue, and there'll be more dirt than you can stand." He did a half turn in his chair. "You or the business."

Henion indicated the snapshot. "When did you take this?"

"About four days ago. He's been off somewhere on the road."

"And where is he now?"

"Back in town. I saw him get off the noon train with his luggage. They'll be straining at the leash, depending on your plans. Right now, today, tonight, the sooner the surer."

Henion pressed his eyelids until he saw spots. "I've got to take the 6:14 to town," he said. "I've got that Bigelow and Cunningham meeting to go to—"

"—but Mr. Henion, sir," said a cottony voice at his shoulder. Jenny Rand. Through the spots he saw Rex quieting her, warning her out of the room. How long had she been standing behind him? How much had she heard? The door closed and her typewriter started.

"Thanks, Rex," he said, standing. Rex, tall, sun-bronzed, athletic, walked with him out the door and through the anteroom. "Mr. Henion, sir—," Jenny said from her typewriter.

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"*Miss* Rand," Rex Devereaux warned.

Downstairs Henion surveyed the graying sky and climbed into Sue's convertible. His own car was in the shop at Braeswood, eleven miles away. He left town and drove out the curling roads through the fall coloring, swung uphill past the Country Club, and turned left to climb into Maple Hills. He stuck the convertible into the carport and inside the house he slumped into a chair with a bourbon, his eyes closed.

Where was she now? For a month or more he'd known about Dugger. Why did he dread it so, the scene he knew had to come? Why was it so essential that a man's pride take him right into the sewer? A man, went a line heard from somewhere, will try the hardest to find out what he least wants to know.

Next door Ethel Caldwell dragged her lawn furniture into a shed. He ought to be out there helping her, but he wasn't. He lifted the phone and called the Serve-U Garage in Braeswood. Your car is ready, sir; would you like us to run it over? He told them to put it in the lot with the keys in the usual place and he'd pick it up en route from town late tonight. Which was his second lie within the hour.

He wasn't going to any meeting. There wasn't one. He wasn't sure of what he was going to do, but he was going to end this nonsense right now. He was tired of the smirks and smiles around town, and the clumsy silences when he entered a room. He showered and shaved and folded his plaid reversible overcoat into his attaché case, wrote a note to Sue saying he'd be in town until after midnight, and called a cab.

He was at the station ten minutes ahead of the 6:14, and went to stand in the shelter of the construction fencing. He smoked two cigarettes and, feeling the chill, bent to get the plaid shortcoat from the attaché case as the train pulled in. He stood on the rear platform of the next-to-last car, scarcely noticing when his commuter ticket was clipped.

A factory slid by, a freeway coiled beneath, a jet from Kennedy seemed to hang motionless. He would have made a poor criminal. A few lies and he'd polluted the day, and now came the cuckold's sorry role. He doubted that the conductor, three cars up, would see him get off the train but, unproud of what he was doing, he wasn't against padding the odds in his favor.

He took off the topcoat, reversed it, and put it on black-side out. Collar turned up, he got off at Braeswood and made his way through the inadequate crowd. He found a side street to the Serve-U, picked out his car on the unattended lot, reached for his keys in the ashtray, and drove out of town into the darkness.

Barely seven o'clock. Killing

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time, he went idling along the side roads and byways, avoiding traffic. To get this done and finished. To corner her just once when she couldn't scream filth and tantrums about his "cheap accusations," his "suspicious mind." To throw them both through a glass window in their underwear and walk away. The Caldwells were just next door; he'd corral them for witnesses. And that would be that.

7:33. What were they doing now? A martini-very-dry before the steak, or would they bore themselves with such throat-clearings? They had, or thought they had, five hours left—time enough for everything. And was Rex Devereaux up on his patio with his special infrared, through-the-bedroom-window lens on his telephoto camera? No, he'd said he was taking in a car-race movie in Manhasset, having dropped his bit of sunshine on the day. Rex was getting pretty good with that camera.

Well, now, let's not get bitter. Like Rex said, it was for the business. Rex was a shrewd and hard-working man. Henion had stolen him from a good company and in six years had sold him a partnership —Rex's condition for turning down an even flossier offer with a competitor. A good businessman, Rex, a go-getter. He just didn't know what not to do.

Slowly, deliberately, Henion covered the hills and woodlands between the towns, an eye on his watch. Toward eight he headed the car up Rutherford Lane and then turned left onto a primitive and little-used winding trail that cut through the thick growth behind his property. He doused his lights for the last hundred yards, parked, and walked up through the trees to his backyard.

Would Devereaux be watching, savoring the scene, indulging this leak in Henion's manhood? No, Devereaux's lights were out. He'd be enjoying himself at his movie.

Henion crossed the yard. Lights burned everywhere but in the bedroom. Out front he saw Dugger's sedan. He keyed open the back door and went softly along the carpeted hallway. As he did so, the phone began to ring, but no one answered. He continued forward and turned into the bedroom, lit only by the light from the hall.

All the conditioning. All the— All the crime movies and TV thrillers he'd seen, mystery novels he'd read, all the cool and expertise and gimmickry and instant tricks he could have learned from them— and his sole contribution to the science was to knock that screaming phone off the hook and fall into the bathroom to throw up.

Gasping miserably, arms on the porcelain, he read there the scope of his doom. He saw some horn-rimmed police chemist analyzing this outpouring as against what he'd eaten for lunch, feeding that data into the great monstrous hop-

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per wherein it cogged with the lint from his breeches, soil from his shoes, tireprints on the trail behind, car missing from the garage lot at seven, shop which had developed Devereaux's photo, note saying he'd not be back until midnight, a dozen witnesses in Braeswood he'd not noticed, and his non-attendance at a non-meeting in New York.

They were dead, both of them: Sue, eyes wide, through the forehead, Dugger at least twice in the back, and Henion's own war-souvenir Luger between her feet. In New York you were not supposed to possess such a weapon, not unless it had been de-firing-pinned or otherwise gelded by the police. Anyone who'd ever been in his den knew he had one. Bury it? They'd dig bullets out of the mattress, or out of them.

He found himself dazedly wiping his prints off the telephone headset. Caught in a mirror-view of this act, sensing the almost comedic futility of it, he went faint again. He replaced the phone and started out; it started ringing again.

He was crossing the backyard when the floodlights from the Caldwell yard touched him. Bert was out there, tugging at the white glider that Ethel had not been able to move alone. He ran for the woodline. Had Bert called his name, or was that the wheeze of his own breathing, or the telephone ringing, or his mind? He slumped into his car.

He had nothing. He had a punched railroad ticket, Goldswich to New York, still usable from Braesburn. There was a conductor who might recall punching it and who might not have seen him get off. There was the vague possibility that they'd not yet missed his car off the garage lot. That was what he had—all he had.

He drove to Braeswood and reparked where he'd picked it up, skulked up the same back alley, and boarded the next New York train, riding the darkened platform all the way. From Penn Station he walked to an ornate saloon on East 36th Street where the bartender knew him by name. There, drink in hand, he thought, interrupting himself only to leaf through a Nassau County phone directory and make a call.

Back at the bar he took up smoking again and thought some more. When he'd thought all the thoughts his skull would accommodate without splintering, he said good night to the barkeep and walked back to catch the 11:02 to Braeswood. Eight drinks and he had not felt a thing.

They were waiting—ambulance, revolving red beacons, neighbors overcoated in their pajamas, coroner, police, detectives, vomit analysts, soil chemists, lint pickers, fingerprint men, flashbulbs, and the press and drunk collegians with their short-skirted girls in the yard. Sue's mother had tried to reach her

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"endlessly." When someone took the phone off without answering, she *knew* something was wrong. Which it was. The Caldwells, who had seen him leaving via the back yard just after eight (and thought that a little strange), helped her break in a window.

He had done some little good in the township of Coldswich in his twelve years here. Headed the Community Chest, helped build a Little League diamond, went to church twice, hired the handicapped, sat on the town council. He was respected and the crime was one of passion, and his position was a sympathetic one—everyone knew about Sue. They were almost apologetic about having to take him downtown: no handcuffs, time to collect his shaving gear, have a last drink.

Coldswich's was a nicer, newer police station than most, if hardly large enough for the assembled ghouls. His sad role stood him well. They were, it appeared, quite ready to let him flap himself out like a boated flounder before showing him to his room. And he did have a couple of friends. Rex Devereaux, a bartender in New York, others who thought they recalled seeing him on the 6:14, or somewhere.

But then the Caldwells made their reluctant statement and a phone call to the Braeswood garage owner said his car had been taken out at seven, and the roof slid decisively down.

"Help me, Rex," he pleaded, head in his hands.

"I'm here, Charlie," Rex consoled, and addressed them. He'd worked late before heading for the movie in Manhasset. From his office window he had *watched* Charlie Henion get on that train.

"Tell them what I was wearing, Rex."

"Sure. He had on a black shortcoat."

"And where was I going? To the Bigelow and Cunningham meeting, right?"

"That's the dope—the straight dope."

"Well, then," said Chief of Police Grimmett softly, "all you got to do, Mr. Henion, is call someone who was at that meeting and get them to say you was there."

"I can't," Henion said. "I didn't go."

"Didn't go?" asked Rex, aghast.

"—but Mr. Henion," said a cottony voice. Jenny Rand again.

"Yes, Jenny?"

"If I could have told you—I was *try*ing to tell you in the office—that Bigelow and Cunningham meeting wasn't until *tomorrow* night."

"Thank you, Jenny. And from what you know of it, would you consider that an important meeting?"

"It sounds like about the biggest thing we've ever landed—a whole nationwide string of motels."

"Exactly. And to your knowledge did Mr. Devereaux know about this meeting and when it was?"

"Why, yes, I'm sure he did."

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"Sure he did. It was he who made the final arrangements for the meeting while I was in Buffalo, and it was right there on his desk calendar like a billboard, wasn't it, Jenny?"

Rex said, "What are you getting at Charlie?"

"Nothing much, Rex, except that I purposely set you up with that blunder and you jumped on it like a half-starved hyena. You know damned well when that meeting was and it was stark fresh in your mind because you were just finishing a phone conversation with Bigelow when I came into your office. And you knew I knew better, and you didn't raise one finger to save me that sixty-mile round trip—you even throttled Jenny when she tried to—because you knew in that instant that I was up to something else, and right there in your lap was a lie, an alibi I could not have made stand up, and a witness to both of them."

"Oh, Charlie," sighed Devereaux, all hurt and disillusionment. "You were up*set,* fellow, and *I* was because *you* were. My mind wasn't on —"

"I was upset at your gall, Rex. I was about to come over that desk after you. You showing me pictures of Sue with a man when I've got it from a dozen sources about you and Sue and your place up the hill every time I got a safe distance out of town. Until she kicked you out for little Dugger. That really stung you, didn't it, Rex. It really made you hate her guts."

"O-h-h, for heaven' sake. Now wait a minute, boy, *wait a—*"

"I'm sure you did see me get on that train, but not in any black coat and not from your office window. You chose the clothes I wore at the scene of the crime so there'd be no conflict with the Caldwells' testimony. That coat's a reversible and when I put it on—plaid side out—I was behind that board wall and not even visible from your office.

"I didn't reverse it to the black-side out until Braeswood. I purposely haven't got it on now; it's up in the car, re-reversed to the plaid. So the only way you could have seen me in a black coat was if you were in Braeswood when I got off—which you couldn't be if you'd seen me board here from your office window —or while I was *crossing my backyard twice at around eight o'clock,* which you sure as hell couldn't see from a movie theater in Manhasset. Where were you, Rex, off in the bushes with your camera again?"

Devereaux laughed harshly. "I've got the ticket stub to that movie right here in my pocket." He slammed it on the desk before Chief Grimmett. "I went in there at seven and was there until ten."

"Sure you've got it. Sixty-thousand-dollar-a-year executives always hang on to their movie ticket stubs and know exactly which pocket they're in. They always remember precisely just when they went in and came out. I just hope you've got someone who *saw* you

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leaving there at ten, because what you had to do, once you sensed I was going to do what you so urgently suggested—double back and walk in on them—was to punch into the movie and get out and drive the twenty minutes to my place before I got there. I loafed around to give everybody enough time, but you didn't make it by much. I could still smell the powder in the bedroom."

His laugh was strangulated. "This is just fantastic! You pull a phony trip to get rid of your wife, I come down here in the middle of the night to help you—"

"I expected something damp and green—a flashbulb, newspaper headlines—but not murder. I underestimated you, Rex. Lord knows why. I've got about four honorable witnesses, clients I developed before you ever stuck a foot into this company, who'll testify you've been sidling around behind my back, sounding them out about what they might think of your possibly going into business on your own. You wanted this business bad. I've caught you in too many cute maneuvers. So here was your chance—to get back at Sue and pin me with a killing and walk off with the whole piece of baggage."

Devereaux smiled. "And a-l-l you've got to do is prove that from your jail cell."

"Let me try. That Luger isn't the standard 9 mm. model—it's a 7.65. I don't keep any ammunition. It takes that off beat, bottleneck 30 Luger stuff you have to go over to Hempstead to buy, and there are two people who know that—you and me; we took it shooting on a hunting trip last year, remember?

"So I checked tonight with old Friede from that gun shop and told my third or fourth constructive lie of the day. I said I'd asked you to pick up a box of 30 Luger ammunition for me, and had you by any chance done it? Yes, he said, yes, you had, three days ago—the day after you took that sick picture—"

"Then drown in your own grease," Rex said, starting out. "I'm leaving this insanity."

"No, you ain't," Grimmett said.

"—but I feel so terrible, Mr. Henion," Jenny said. "If I'd just raised my voice and kept talking you'd have known about the meeting and none of this would have—"

Henion, standing, closed her pretty mouth with his hand. "How much have we been paying you, Jenny?" If you had kept talking, I'd have fired you, he didn't say.

'Q'

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a *NEW* spy spoof by

JACOB HAY

Jacob Hay's harshest (and perhaps funniest) and most symbolic (and perhaps most revealing) spy story, recounting the undercover career of Josef Voskovic and the sad undoing of his secret plans and secret training. Josef, ambitious, determined, resourceful, and operating against unnatural odds, certainly couldn't be faulted for trying . . .

THE MAN FROM H-to-M

by JACOB HAY

IT WAS MRS. FURSTMEYER'S DECISION to have his rented room painted from top to bottom that began the chain of circumstances which led, in the fullness of time, to the abrupt end of the career of Josef Voskovic, aged 31, clerk of the Second Class in the Ministry of State Security (Records and Files Directorate) of the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Czechoslovakia.

In the five years since he had joined the Directorate, Josef had made a most favorable impression on his superiors, rising from his lowly First Class status and a desk among scores of others like it in a huge room to the next grade, and his own cubicle in a room equally huge. It had been clearly intimated to him that his stay in the cubicle would not be for long; a man as careful in detail as Josef Voskovic could soon look for his own private office, perhaps even a secretary, eventually even a seat among the mighty of the Directorate itself. In sum, his future beckoned brightly and you would think that he would have looked forward to it eagerly.

Instead, he viewed it with mounting dread every passing year. He would grow old and die among these endless rows of towering filing cabinets, his ears filled to the last second by the dull roar of hundreds of drawers rolling outward and then slamming shut. The last fragrance to assail his nostrils would be that of manila folders. He could not help it that he was so attentive to his work; it was almost instinctive by now.

"In your case, Josef," his mother had told him when he was sixteen, "you will have to work harder—much harder—than other people. You will have to prove yourself to

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your employers that you can do as well as anybody else. Otherwise, my son, you are sure to starve."

So Josef, whose childhood memories were scarred by the war and the fear of starvation, had worked very hard indeed to get through the gymnasium, and had been graduated near the head of his class. The Civil Service examination to enter the Ministry's employment had been simple for him, although an important exception to the rules had to be made to permit Josef to take the examination. The exception was made in view of his high scholastic record; but Josef was not informed that it had been made—to spare him possible embarrassment.

Josef made the highest marks in a decade, was accepted immediately, and assigned to that most sensitive of departments, the Directorate of Records and Files. Here were housed some of the most fascinating adventure sagas in all the world—police reports, espionage reports, counter-espionage reports, and the dossiers of the Ministry's own agents and known foreign agents.

These documents became, in a matter of weeks, Josef Voskovic's opium. Almost nightly he stayed long after working hours, reading until, reluctantly, he would go home when the night security guard came through on his first check.

"You will go far in this service, my boy," the elderly night security guard, who was the closest approach to a friend Josef had in Prague, would often remark. "I remember, years ago, the Director himself, then a clerk like you, used to read late into the evening. You will see, Voskovic—for you, the sky is the limit."

"You are too thin, too pale, Herr Voskovic," Mrs. Furstmeyer would scold him, in her German-accented Czech. "You should walk more, get more fresh air."

But Josef was hooked. God, the adventures these men had. There was Kolwitz, slipping in and out of West Germany whenever he pleased signing himself as "Cassius." And Bernhardt ("Pluvius"), set up in his little tobacconist's shop just off Piccadilly. And Orlovski, the Miami playboy, keeping an eye on the Cuban exiles and calling himself Hank Brewster as he lounged on the Florida beach. Danger, even death, hovered over them all, lending a terrible zest to life's every second.

How did a man get such a job? What qualifications did he need? Besides courage—and there was no question, no question at all, that Josef had courage to spare; his whole life was proof of that. He had timidly approached his superior about the matter.

"Quite out of the question, my dear Voskovic, and not for the reason you may think. My point is simply that I would not approve of your request for transfer to begin with because you are—and I mean this sincerely—much too valuable to

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the State right here in the Directorate. Indeed, only this morning the Director singled out your H-to-M Section as having shown the greatest improvement in operation over any other and, my boy, it wouldn't surprise me to see you advanced to head up the H-to-S Section, a real promotion, believe me."

Hopelessly Josef had returned to H-to-M.

"I'm afraid it will mean a night at a hotel, Herr Voskovic," Mrs. Furstmeyer had apologized, "but I am ashamed to charge such a nice young man rent for such a room. It must be painted."

"Please. I don't mind in the least. In fact, it will give me a fine excuse to see that new hotel—what's its name? The one where all the American tourists stay. For one night I shall be a rich capitalist throwing his money around."

Josef, who was most frugal in his habits, had plenty of money to throw around, but he did not. He telephoned the new Continental Hotel, near the center of Prague, reserved his room and went straight to find the supper he had also ordered by phone waiting, piping hot, for his arrival. The waiter, a worldly man, did not spare Josef a glance as he deftly served the fish, the roast duckling, the Chablis, and the dessert.

Afterward, Josef elected not to descend to the hotel's night club for the music and dancing. But when he went to his valise he realized that he had forgotten to pack the novel he was reading. Hennecott, the supremely clever British agent whose activities had baffled the MGB for far too long, was about to get a chop behind the ear that would end forever his nefarious crimes in the name of imperialism.

Damn! Josef, who rarely cursed, said to himself, and began an aimless search through the bureau drawers; people sometimes left newspapers and magazines behind when they checked out. He was lucky. In the bottom drawer of the bureau he found a battered copy of an English girlie magazine. It was better than nothing, thought Josef, who read and spoke English reasonably well as one of the requirements of his job.

The fiction was awful; there was no other word for it, but he read it doggedly through. People paid good money for this trash? Incredible. He turned to the back of the magazine.

The advertisements were startlingly frank, even saucy; lacy and revealing girls' underthings, nude photographs, family planning, forbidden books, and—wait a minute!

Josef read the ad, tucked in between one for a massage parlor and another for leather clothing:

LEARN DETECTION FOR PROFIT
Intelligent, imaginative men and women sought for comprehensive course in criminology and allied sciences (6 wks) lead-

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ing to interesting, rewarding careers. Write today for more information, rates, etc.

LONDON SCHOOL OF SCIENTIFIC CRIMINOLOGY

Josef had to squint to read the tiny print of the address, which was in London's Bayswater Road.

Who could object? He would, after all, only be trying to improve himself. And England—well, relations with England were reasonably favorable; mail from there should arouse no unpleasant suspicions, as mail from America might. Suppose, at his own expense, he were to take the six weeks' comprehensive course (there was no doubt that he would pass the examinations, and brilliantly), and then present his diploma to his Chief. Surely, with such a gesture of sacrifice and willingness before him, the Chief would relent and allow Josef Voskovic to apply for service in the Espionage Branch.

The London School of Scientific Criminology's reply to Josef's letter arrived at Mrs. Furstmeyer's mailbox two weeks later in a plain envelope.

"Please note," wrote the Hon. Admissions Dir., Eustace Finch, "the unmarked envelope in which my reply to your letter of inquiry has arrived. It is the first essential of the serious aspirant to a professional career in scientific criminology that he remain anonymous, for anonymity is the price of success in this growing field. In theory, not even your closest friend should know that you are preparing yourself for the practise of your chosen profession."

Josef read the letter in the privacy of his newly painted room and rejoiced. And the first lessons, which arrived soon after his dispatch of the tuition fee (Ten Pounds Sterling, first two weeks), were fantastically easy—kid stuff, if you came right down to it. *The Bertillon System of Identifying Criminals, The Science of Fingerprints*—principles that any reasonably intelligent ape could master. The real meat of the course began to appear in Lesson Number Six: *Surveilliance & Techniques.*

"The art of covert surveillance is perhaps the ultimate accomplishment of the professional criminologist," wrote Prof. Hilary Mulchingham in the accompanying text. "To gain experience in this all-important area of criminological expertise, the beginning student should select an individual, any individual, and place him under 24-hour surveillance for a one-day period. This done, the period may be extended at the student's convenience. Detailed reports should be made, showing movements and times.

"For purposes of easy selection and swift achievement of surveillance skills, American tourists are especially recommended, as they are usually readily recognizable, both from lingual variations and from costume. Lesson six will require a minimum of ten surveillance reports. It should be borne in mind

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that the London School of Scientific Criminology depends upon its students for perfect honesty. False reports mean only that the student is cheating himself."

"Paler, thinner, ach! I should write your mother, if I knew her address," Mrs. Furstmeyer had scolded, just after Lesson Number Five, *Dental Identification and Some Aspects of Elemental Forgery.*

"I shall be walking more, Frau Furstmeyer," Josef assured her, smiling. "I shall be following quite a new regimen, believe me," he added. When she had pottered back down the stairs from his third-floor room, he took stock of himself and what he liked to think of as his "working clothes."

The face that looked back at him from the mirror was youthful, almost handsome, with a full head of blond hair, serious blue eyes, and an engaging set of dimples, when he smiled. "His Grandmother's eyes, so bright, so intelligent," was how his mother had described him. So honest and undeceiving, Josef added to himself. And so bitter.

"So, Elizabeth," he whispered to his mirror, "you who giggled when I proposed, you who married that idiot lout, Kreuta, the butcher, you will see, and when I am strolling about London and New York you will be raising your litter of brats in the sophisticated surroundings of Krnov. You, who could have come with me to glorious Prague to be the wife of a national hero, will be wrapping veal and washing diapers in a house that should have been torn down two hundred years ago. The giggles will not come so easily now, I think."

Turning to his newly purchased wardrobe, Josef couldn't help smiling. How had the clerk in the furtive little shop termed the styling? "Like way out, man, just like in New York or—what is it, B.A.? No. Your pardon. Like in L.A. Real cool, you know what I mean?"

The outfit, Josef had decided upon trying it on for size, looked far more suitable for an SS Brigadefuhrer than for a citizen of Prague; but he had seen enough of them, on those few occasions when he had left his room at Mrs. Furstmeyer's for a glass of Pilsner at the pub on the corner, to know that the grim, black leather, high-booted style was back in vogue among the capital's youth, in spite of the government's disapproval and condemnation.

"The value of the surveillance report," wrote Prof. Mulchingham, "lies in the minuteness of its detail. Actions which may appear to have no significance whatsoever to the agent conducting the surveillance may be of infinite value to those charged with analysis of the report. No action, however trivial, should escape the observation of the agent."

How true, Josef mused to himself. This man Mulchingham knew his stuff. Some of Kolwitz's surveillance reports had run to dozens of pages,

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and Orlovski's two-months-long shadowing of Carlos Maguari in Miami had resulted in a novel-length masterpiece which included, among other things, the price of a Chateaubriand at the Fontainebleau and the name of Senor Maquari's then favorite call girl.

"Begin simply," Lesson Number Six commanded. "Your selection should initially depend on some peculiarity of dress or physique, making the subject easier to pick out in a crowd. Your own dress must be inconspicuous, blending easily into the background, or completely appropriate to the milieu."

At breakfast several mornings later, Josef advised Mrs. Furstmeyer that additional duties at the Directorate would require him to work even longer than usual, possibly as late as midnight on some occasions.

"But they are already working you long past the regular hours," Mrs. Furstmeyer protested. "It is not right, Herr Voskovic. I am of a mind to complain to the authorities."

"No, please!" Josef replied, more sharply than he had intended. "It is, after all, in the interests of my career," he added, more gently. "The sacrifice will be worth it, I assure you."

It would not, of course, do for Mrs. Furstmeyer to see him returning, ostensibly, to his work after supper attired in his black leather motorcycle jacket, black denim trousers tucked into black leather boots, and the high-peaked cap that topped off the ensemble. These he would carry in his valise, with the explanation that it contained his night clothes in the event that he decided to sleep at the office. The change of clothing could be simply effected in a public lavatory.

The surveillance of American tourists turned out to be absurdly easy. To begin with, they were ridiculously easy to spot, better dressed, strung about with cameras and light meters, and wearing those stupid expressions of people expecting to be arrested at almost any second by the security police.

It was the detailed reports that were the bore but, as Josef well knew, these would constitute the solid foundation on which he would rest his case.

Subjects Numbers 1 and 2, Mr. and Mrs. Luther T. Hoopes, of Des Moines, Iowa, U.S.A., were almost too easy. Indeed, in their efforts to find the famed Restaurant Granisol, buried away in a tiny alley, Mr. Hoopes had actually turned and come up to Josef, dawdling half a block behind, and, first determining that Josef could speak English, had asked for directions.

"Say, fella," Mr. Hoopes had said, his directions received, "that's real decent of you. How's about you let Mrs. Hoopes and me buy you a drink at the bar on the corner, there. Least we can do."

"I am very sorry, sir, but—"

"C'mon, fella, even if it's only a

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glass of spritz. We owe it to you." Mr. Hoopes smiled benignly. "You're like Lootie, Junior, I'll bet; can't stand the taste of the stuff, even at his age. Sophomore at You of Eye, too."

"What the war did to his generation," Mrs. Hoopes whispered to her husband after Josef, his lemonade downed, left them. "When I think of Lootie—" She sighed, her eyes moist. "Do you think he'll really make varsity tackle next year, Luther?"

John J. Sperling, Middle European Sales Representative of the American Dynamometer Corp., was a tougher proposition who used a hired car and driver; but the difficulties involved in keeping track of Mr. Sperling's movements were overcome by Josef's acquisition of a motor scooter several owners old on the installment purchase plan. Sperling's occasions were, for the most part, unexciting—visits to the Ministry of Construction & Engineering, calls at the homes of Ministry officials. The value of this surveillance, Josef concluded, lay in the experience gained in dodging his motor scooter behind parked cars when Mr. Sperling's automobile slowed or stopped. It took damned quick thinking.

But it was the work afoot that was most challenging. To follow an American down a dark street, to keep a casual eye on him in one of the city's few night spots, even to follow him into the lavatory for a completely unnecessary combing of the hair and grooming of the nails—all this was challenging and exciting.

"Lesson Number Six. Student's results: Excellent," declared the London School of Scientific Criminology exuberantly, and Prof. Mulchingham himself appended a personal note of congratulations.

"I look forward with the greatest interest to your handling of Lesson Number Seven: *Basic Extortion & Blackmail Countermeasures,*" he wrote.

As with Lesson Six, Josef took fullest advantage of the availability of practical experience, and was thus enabled to make a slight increase in his monthly income through the knowledge that the Chief of the A-to-H Section, unknown of course to that worthy man's wife, was keeping a Eurasian graduate student at the University of Prague as his mistress. An honorable man, Josef ceased his demands for money the day the London School of Scientific Criminology advised him that he had passed his written examination for Lesson Seven with flying colors.

But this was mere icing on the cake. Anybody could learn all about blackmail and extortion in a few hours of study. What he needed most was more experience in Lesson Six, and this could easily be fitted in with the requirements of Lesson Eight: *Codes & Ciphers, with Notes on Basic Cryptanalysis.* Indeed, he

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could gain still greater advantage from both lessons were he to put his surveillance reports in code. What an impression that would make!

Within a few weeks Josef's closet was awash with closely written, enormously detailed reports of the surveillances he had undertaken to perfect his art. All were in a code which the London School of Scientific Criminology had declared to be completely unbreakable to any but the most skilled cryptanalyst.

Throughout this period, despite the midnight hours of study, Josef did not neglect his regular job, and as his superior had predicted, he became chief of the H-to-S Section of the Directorate's Records and Files Division, and a letter of commendation from the Director himself was inserted in his personal record.

Lesson Number Nine, *Self-Defense, Judo, and Karate,* posed problems. If, Josef reasoned, he presented himself at some physical training academy to learn these primarily Oriental arts, it would be a dead giveaway. Why was a member of the Directorate staff taking judo and karate, instead of automatic data processing and computer operations? Unless he intended to put it to use professionally, and where else would that be but in espionage or counterespionage? Nonetheless, judo and karate were absolutely indispensable to his future career—indeed, they might make all the difference when he went to present his case.

Although he had long since completed the ten surveillances required by Lesson Six, Josef continued to track American tourists as they left the Continental Hotel to view the sights of Prague, with the result that he frequently found himself in odd corners of the ancient city where few people were in evidence. This lent added zest to the experience, for it required greater care and skill though, after dark, Josef had the feeling that he himself was being followed, and concluded that if this was the case, his shadower was probably intent not on him but on the tourist, whom he intended to yoke and rob once he, Josef, was out of the way. Such criminals, giving Prague and, indeed, all Czechoslovakia a bad name, deserved to be punished.

So it was that upon concluding an evening-long surveillance of Mr. Nathan Levy, of Cleveland, Ohio, whose great-grandparents had emigrated from Prague to the United States and who wished to see their old home in a seedy quarter of the city, Josef slipped into a dark doorway, and as his shadower passed, he nipped smartly out of the blackness and, leaping, executed the sharp throat chop so earnestly recommended by the London School of Scientific Criminology to beginners in karate. His victim went down like a sack.

Lesson Nine saw six of Josef's shadowers out like lights. Sometimes, sitting in the office that went

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with his Section chieftaincy, Josef's mild face would twist into a grin as he wondered what Miss Jelinka, his secretary, would think if she knew that he was capable, with one swift movement, of heaving her across the room. He wondered what his father would think, he who had been so ashamed of Josef's poor showing in sports at school.

"You are looking so much better these days, Herr Voskovic," Mrs. Furstmeyer kept telling him, beaming maternally as she spoke. "But I am sorry to see that you have taken to smoking cigarettes."

Josef's new habit was motivated by the addiction of Koroshko, the handsome, brilliant MGB agent, hero of a series of espionage novels, who had finally brought Hennecott, the villainous British agent, to justice. In times of crisis Koroshko was wont to calmly light a cigarette.

Finally, the splendid day arrived when the morning post brought a large envelope containing Josef's diploma from the London School of Scientific Criminology, certifying that he had successfully completed its courses. The diploma was accompanied by a personal letter from Mr. Claude Fincastle, Manager Dir. of the L.S.S.C., himself, congratulating Josef on having attained the highest marks in the school's long and honorable history, and wishing him well in his new career as a scientific criminologist.

Josef smiled his small twisted smile. Little did Managing Dir. Fincastle know that the subtle skills he and his faculty had imparted to Josef Voskovic might some day be employed against their own country. Bernhardt, with his tobacconist's shop off Piccadilly, couldn't last forever. Josef, with his increasingly fine grasp of English, would be the logical man to take over.

He had spent long hours composing his letter to Bromstein. There was no point in going through his immediate superior who would, of course, refuse to consider the matter. No, the thing to do was to write directly to the mysterious Siegfried Bromstein, Major General of the Czechoslovakian Army and Chief of the Intelligence Directorate, the second most powerful man in State Security and, some said, secretly more powerful than the Minister himself, and taking his orders directly from the Kremlin.

He was unprepared for the prompt response, which came the day after he mailed his letter. He had just finished dictating a somewhat severe reprimand to his successor as head of the H-to-M Section, pointing out that the dossier on Mueller, the Gehlen Organization's man in Prague, was in disarray and appeared to have been handled by a clerk who had just finished eating chocolate. Although he was soon to leave this tedious business, Josef had not permitted himself to become slack in matters of discipline. A junior clerk entered Voskovic's office, looking slightly flustered.

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"Excuse me, sir," he said, a trifle unsteadily, "but two gentlemen from the Intelligence Directorate are asking if you could spare them a moment of your time."

"By all means show them in, Renner," Josef said, dumfounded.

It was the taller of the two visitors who did the talking: General Bromstein would be pleased to receive Mr. Voskovic in his offices at once.

"Splendid, splendid," Josef replied, smiling hugely. "I can turn the Section over to Bulik for the morning."

"General Bromstein will be most pleased," said the taller man smoothly. "We have our car waiting."

The Intelligence Directorate occupied its own quarters across the city, and the exulting Josef felt that Prague had never looked so lovely as it did during this supremely enjoyable ride.

General Bromstein, a stocky, dark-haired man whose eyebrows met in the middle forming a kind of second mustache to match the one beneath his hawk's nose, received Josef in full uniform and with great geniality.

"Sit down, sit down by all means, my dear sir," he bade a flattered Josef, waving toward one of the vast leather armchairs before his imposing desk. Josef sank self-consciously into the depths of the chair, waiting for Bromstein's amused stare, but there was none.

"But this is magnificent," Bromstein declared happily, extracting a cigar from his humidor and extending it to Josef, who shook his head numbly. He wished desperately that he had remembered to bring his pack of cigarettes with him, but the cigar would have made him ill. The General lit the cigar for himself and exhaled a mighty cloud of blue smoke toward the ceiling before returning his sharp gaze to Voskovic.

"By God, Voskovic, I never will understand the C.I.A.'s methods, if they are in fact methods and not madness."

"The imperialists are indeed devious," Josef allowed himself to agree, further flattered that the great General Bromstein would open the conversation with professional shop talk. "Of that there is no doubt."

"Oh, come off it, Voskovic," the General exclaimed impatiently. "You and I are both old hands at this game, even if we are on different sides of the fence. Now why in God's name have you saved me the trouble of coming after you? What the hell's your proposition? Why does the C.I.A.'s top man in Prague ask to see me if he doesn't have some sort of proposition?"

"Different sides—proposition—C.I.A.?" Josef's voice was that of an aging choir boy reaching for a high note.

"My dear chap, we began keeping a quiet eye on you within weeks after you came to work for the Directorate and started staying long

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after hours, reading our files. Such behavior in a very junior clerk is a bit unusual—in fact, almost beyond belief. But since we knew where to lay our hands on you, we did nothing. So for five years, you were simply an agent in place. Then, some six or seven weeks ago, you finally opened your communications channel to the States via that laughably transparent front organization in London.

"But my dear General—" Josef started to protest and fell silent as the General held up a hand.

"Please allow me the professional pleasure of explaining our own methods. I must confess that we have been unable to break the code you employ in your reports to London. Those coded reports in your room—mere smokescreens, of course, intended to put us off the track—were child's play, by the way, and I can't imagine why you went to all that trouble. Or did you intend to turn them over to us as evidence of your patriotism? And we would be expected to believe that here was a lowly clerk doing his citizen's duty by following foreigners around the city, was that it, Voskovic?

"I concede, on the other hand, that your insertion of yourself in place of the real Josef Voskovic, who, we have reason to suspect, disappeared during the train journey from his home in Krnov to Prague, was masterly, quite masterly. After which, posing as the real Voskovic, you had complete access to our files, our most secret files, and when you had learned enough, you opened communications, right?"

Josef could only stare in total bewilderment, feeling panic rising, his mouth dry, his ears buzzing.

"Why did we allow you to continue?" the General asked rhetorically, his voice thoughtful. "For a number of reasons. We knew you could never memorize all the material in our files—no one man could possibly achieve that. The solution was absurdly simple. From the time you opened communications all the dossiers you ordered to be sent to your office—I assume you photographed them—were deliberately falsified, a matter easily arranged. So our inability to break your code is of comparatively small consequence. Amusing, no?"

The General blew a smoke ring, and smiled appreciatively at its perfect shape. "We even gave you a promotion so that you would not suspect us of suspecting you."

Josef's reply was an incoherent sputter. The General chuckled.

"Then, too," he continued pleasantly, "our procedure allowed us to ascertain your contacts among the American agents posing as tourists. I must say I rather enjoyed that hideous black costume of yours, very much the Prague teen-ager. Quite original."

General Bromstein's expression became rueful.

"But was it really necessary to

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knock my men out? They were, after all, doing you no harm, my dear fellow. Branke, poor chap, was hospitalized for a week with a badly sprained neck." The General's voice became brisk. "This won't do, will it? Now, let's get down to business, Voskovic or whatever your name is. What's your proposition? What do the C.I.A. have in mind? Come now, out with it, man!"

Josef began to babble. The General regarded him with sympathetic interest, then pressed a button set into the panel at one side of his desk. Josef's escorts entered.

"Take him away," the General commanded quietly. "I've seen it happen before—the poor devil's gone clean out of his head. Understandable, of course, especially in his case. Nevertheless, he can still be quite useful to me. Have them give him a sedative and keep him sedated until I need him. And, of course, completely isolated."

Josef's babblings had given way to high, hysterical laughter as he was led gently from the office, offering no resistance.

Ah, well, the General thought to himself, that's one of the chances you take in this dirty business. It was possible, of course, that Voskovic, his mind unhinged, had intended to defect and seek asylum from his organization's vengeance. If the C.I.A. did in actual fact have a proposition to discuss, Bromstein reflected, he would learn about it in the fullness of time from the unfortunate Voskovic's successor. In the meantime, Josef Voskovic could serve an important purpose.

So it came to pass that, a few weeks later on a dark and blustery night in the middle of a Berlin bridge lit only by the glaring headlights of two cars facing one another from opposite ends of the structure, two huddled groups of figures shuffled slowly toward each other, halting a few feet apart. No salutes were exchanged as Hank Brewster came home from Miami and Josef Voskovic, described by General Bromstein during the negotiations only as "an important member of your organization," and still hazy with sedatives and incoherent of speech, began his long journey to the at-first bewildered and then indignant reception in a vast building rambling massively over the Virginia countryside just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

As Josef and his new friends moved toward the western end of the bridge, General Bromstein looked after them, shaking his head. "No," he muttered to his aide-de-camp, "I will never understand the C.I.A. mentality. The incredible gall of these people. Consider, my dear Kolsky: they plan to infiltrate our most secret files, and to do it, they send out an agent just four feet tall. Fantastic, simply fantastic, wouldn't you say?"

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a *NEW* crime-detective story by

ANTHONY GILBERT

Does anyone write better crime short stories about old ladies, especially old maiden ladies, than Anthony Gilbert? No, Anthony Gilbert has the "touch"—the empathy, the compassion, and she communicates that deep understanding . . .

WHO CARES ABOUT AN OLD WOMAN?

by ANTHONY GILBERT

NO ONE PAID ANY ATTENTION TO the old woman or even knew of her existence until the day she walked out of her flat and didn't come back.

If she'd planned it she couldn't have chosen a better week to vanish; the country was holding a nation-wide appeal for consideration of the aged—she was 73—and it's ironical to reflect that this unexceptional old creature must have proved an asset to innumerable collectors of contributions and distributors of literature during those first days. People who would normally have buttoned up their purses were ashamed to refuse and handed over their reluctant donations. I know this was so, because I was staying at a boarding house in London at the time and a Mrs. Mayor, who had the table next to me in the dining room, said she'd made a "killing" as never before.

"That must be a consolation to her wherever she is," I suggested.

It was her doctor who started the hare running. Coming round in the late afternoon in response to a desperate appeal on the telephone, Dr. Gwendolyn Lewis couldn't get a reply to her ringing, knocking, or calling. The landlord of the house, a Mrs. Marchmont, said she hadn't seen the old lady, but she'd probably forgotten about phoning the doctor to come and had taken herself off to the pictures.

"Rubbish!" snapped Dr. Lewis. "The woman said she had a black-out last night. She'd hardly be going out of the house and to the cinema in those circumstances."

Only it was shown that if she had telephoned the doctor she must have gone out because she hadn't an instrument of her own and there wasn't a pay phone on the premises.

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"Probably collapsed on the way back," snapped Dr. Lewis, and to Mrs. Marchmont's dismay the doctor called in the police.

Mrs. Marchmont, who subsequently gave a TV interview, said, "It's absurd to suggest I'm unsympathetic, but it doesn't do any house any good to have the police on the premises; people always think the worst, you know."

She said a lot of other things—in fact, I'm indebted to that interview, which I saw on the communal TV set in my boarding house, for the setting to Elvira Pettigrue's story. I'm 73 myself and it's natural I should be interested. It all goes to show how many little fish can slip through the National Welfare net.

The police didn't take long to find out that Mrs. P. wasn't in her flat. That's what she called it, though actually it was a bed-sitter with an alcove for a small cooker and a sort of cupboard housing a toilet and shower. She wasn't on the fire escape either and she hadn't fallen out of a window. In short, she had vanished like a puff of smoke.

None of the locals seemed to know much about her; even those who remembered her existence only thought of her as another old woman, and to them it was obvious that all old women are alike—just as Westerners are said to believe that all Chinese have precisely similar features, and all human creatures think the same about rabbits. It's only to the people concerned (and the rabbits) that any individuality exists.

The police didn't find a note in her apartment—naturally not, Dr. Lewis told the press, since Mrs. Pettigrue was not the suicidal type; what they did find was her pension book and her Post Office Savings account. She had a suitcase on top of the wardrobe, and Mrs. Marchmont said it was the only piece of luggage she had brought with her when she came to the house fifteen years earlier. They found no photograph of the deceased Mr. Pettigrue—no one seemed to know what his profession or business was though it was generally believed the missing woman was a widow—and no likenesses of children (if she had any), not even one of those yellowed fly-blown pictures taken half a century ago of the missing woman's parents. No one recalled her ever having had a visitor, the postman said he seldom brought her any letters, and she couldn't have had phone calls because she had no instrument. From all accounts, she was as nearly a ghost as a human being could be.

One odd thing that the police did find troubled them considerably. This was a false hairpiece of a chestnut shade that was carefully wrapped in tissue paper in her dresser drawer. Mrs. Marchmont identified it at once. She told several million people on television, "I knew it was false, of course—she always wore it. So absurd!—why can't old people be willing to look their age?"

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I boiled when I heard that. Old people are like everyone else—they must make the best of themselves and some of us are pretty handicapped. I know what I'm talking about. Recently I've been wearing a black eyepatch and no one does that for fun; once in the boarding house I heard a visitor murmur to someone else, "Long John Silver's widow has just come in." I don't think of myself as a violent woman but I felt murder in my heart. You should see me if I took it off, I wanted to shout; you'd get a shock then.

I don't think the police ever considered the possibility of foul play, not even when it came out that the missing woman had been drawing heavily on her Post Office account in recent weeks.

"Blackmail," whispered my neighbor at the boarding house.

"What on earth could anyone have on an old woman like that?" I demanded.

But Mrs. Lyon said it was never safe to judge a book by the binding and the most unexpected people had evil pasts. Had I ever visited the Chamber of Horrors at Madam Tussaud's?

I rather think some of the sensational details were built up by a young fellow named Bruce who had recently been taken on by the neighborhood *Argus* as a cub reporter. He had been told to find stories that would increase circulation, and here was his opportunity. He dashed round interviewing people who might have known Mrs. Pettigrue and he actually did unearth a few acquaintances whom she had met in the park. Like a lot of elderly solitary people—I do it myself sometimes—she used to sit about on the free benches and talk to anyone beside her. It helps to pass the time, and reminds you there are other people in the world as lonely as yourself.

But she hadn't seemed to unburden herself of anything very melodramatic, and inevitably interest began to fade. Paragraphs about the missing woman were relegated to the back pages. The police had made the usual inquiries at hospitals and mortuaries, and naturally they had considered the likelihood of her suffering from amnesia—there was that record of a blackout that had made her call the doctor.

But even so she had to be *somewhere*. There was talk of dragging the neighborhood canal, only if she'd meant to do away with herself what was wrong with a bottle of sleeping pills? I can see that with only one eye, I assured Mrs. Lyon.

And then there was an unexpected development. The police received an anonymous postcard with a London postmark, printed with what they believed to be a post-office pen. It said simply: *Take another look in Deadwood Tip.* This tip was on a bombed-out site not far from the old woman's home. There had been considerable protests about its never having been cleared; as it

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was, it was simply the local rubbish dump, and everything imaginable—and a few things at which any normal imagination would boggle—were thrown there: outworn household goods (because it's next to impossible to get anything taken away by the official collectors), pieces of gas stoves, wrecked bicycles, tanks with holes in them—everything.

It was generally assumed that the police had already searched there—Mrs. Pettigrue used to go quite often on long solitary walks—but when they got the card they went again. And this time they found something, though I don't suppose they really expected to. They'd been getting so-called clues from people who had seen Mrs. Pettigrue or met people who were certain *they* had, and all of the clues had proved valueless. But they were so few and thin that I suppose they thought they couldn't afford to disregard anything; so they went and they found this rather shabby black patent-leather handbag.

The bag was empty and there was nothing to tie it up with the old woman; but one of the policemen who had taken part in the original search of Deadwood Tip swore it hadn't been there then, so they took it round to Trent House, and Mrs. Marchmont said, "Well, if it isn't hers it's a twin brother. I've often seen Mrs. Pettigrue carry a bag looking just like this one, when she came down to pay the rent."

"Here's one for the book," I said to Mrs. Lyon when the news broke. "People are going to put some very awkward questions to the police."

Mrs. Lyon, who isn't nearly the fool she looks, said, "It wouldn't surprise me if that young Bruce wrote the postcard just to keep the story alive."

"Having secreted the bag somewhere else until now?" I inquired.

That flummoxed her. All the same it did seem a bit odd.

There were various suggestions such as—she was being blackmailed; she'd gone to meet her blackmailer, taking the money; there had been trouble, perhaps she had threatened police action, and then there had been a struggle and she'd got the worst of it.

"You should be writing thrillers," I said to Mrs. Lyon when she came up with this notion. "Why didn't Mr. X leave her body in the Tip, too? And if he was going to remove her, why leave the bag as incriminating evidence?"

Mrs. Pettigrue's name came right back to the front page—and then overnight all interest in her vanished—as if she had never existed. They say the ordinary person can only be interested in one thing at a time—certainly in only one sensation at a time; and they say too that actors and actresses hate to share the stage with a child or an animal, because it always gets the major applause. And that was what happened now—well, interest if not applause.

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A child was kidnapped from in front of her parents' home, and the whole country was immediately agog. She had been seen walking away down the street with someone she called Uncle Jack; only it turned out she didn't have an Uncle Jack and, like Mrs. Pettigrue, she didn't come home.

If the more compassionate members of the community had been interested in the fate of a comparatively friendless old woman, the whole country was roused by the disappearance of a child. And not just the police. The Army was turned out to help in the search, volunteers swarmed into police stations, there were pictures and appeals on television—Mrs. Pettigrue was simply forgotten.

I didn't quite realize how utterly obliterated she had become until I went into the Park that blazing afternoon, carrying a midday edition I'd bought to see if there was any fresh news. There wasn't, about either of them, but the kidnapped child, little Susan Blair, occupied two columns on the front page, and no mention was made of Mrs. P. Being as you might say identified with her, I felt not just disconcerted, I was shocked, I didn't see how any human being could be forgotten so quickly.

"I suppose it could happen to any of us," I said to a smartly dressed woman who came to share my seat.

"What could? Oh, the paper. Any news?"

"Not even a mention," I said bitterly.

She looked at the sheet on my lap. "What on earth can that mean? She's the main topic. This sort of thing gives me a *frisson* down the spine. When you think how helpless children are—"

"I meant Mrs. Pettigrue," I explained.

She stared at me as if she thought I was out of my mind.

"That poor old trout!" she said. "Why can't they let her rest in peace Not that I'm not sorry for her, of course, but she'd had a pretty good run for her money."

"Which makes her expendable?" I suggested. "I wonder if you'd feel so philosophic if it was you who was so casually dismissed."

"Oh, I shan't make old bones," she assured me airily. "Anyway, I wouldn't want to go on cumbering the earth when I'd stopped being of use to anyone."

"It's easy to be generous when you've got a full purse," I told her. "It's when you're living on the smell of an oil rag that you become careful."

It's true—about old people clinging to life, I mean. Even when you can't believe it's worth anything to them to hang on.

My companion looked at me with a certain respect. "That's quite a clever analogy," she said.

"You'll think of something just as clever when your turn comes," I assured her. "When you realize it

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isn't enough just to have a roof over your head and something on your plate, you want to be acknowledged as a member of the human race."

"She doesn't seem to have made much effort," the woman said. "I always believe that lonely people are mainly responsible for their own condition. Why didn't she join a church or go to a Darby and Joan Club or something? You can't expect the community to carry you all the way."

Then she stood up, patted away a yawn, and said, "Hot, isn't it? I feel like a piece of toast that's been left too long under the grill"—and she moved away, as cool and uncaring as a cat.

I shall always hold her responsible for what happened later.

I hung about the park for a time—it was Mrs. Lyon's afternoon at Bingo; I don't play myself and I hadn't cottoned to anyone else in the boarding house. When I started home the weather had changed and I began to shiver; it was quite cold. So on the way back I did something I rarely do—I went into the Fox and Grapes to buy myself a brandy. The boarding house doesn't have a license, of course.

I went into the public bar and only realized when I reached the counter that I should have gone into the private bar. There weren't many women there and those who were looked thoroughly at home. I felt as usual that everyone was staring at me, though I believe it's true that if you went out in London without a head on, no one would notice.

After I'd paid for my brandy I looked round for a place to sit down. Nearly all the tables were occupied, but there was one at the back where a young fellow was sitting—twenty-six or so I suppose he was—and when he caught my eye he said, "Okay, Ma, plenty room here."

For some reason I felt I should apologize for my presence.

"I've had a bit of a shock," I said.

"Oh, anyone can see you're not at home in a public house," he told me, but he said it nicely and he grinned. I looked round the crowded room.

"It seems very full," I offered.

"I said you weren't accustomed to pubs," he repeated. "Half the time here you're lucky if you're not standing on the other fellow's feet."

Then he saw the newspaper I was carrying and said, "Mind if I have a dekko?" and picked it up without waiting for an answer.

The next moment he had thrown it down again. "No wonder you wanted a double brandy if you were on King's Rhapsody," he said. "Finished fifth in a field of seven."

I blinked. Then I said, "Oh, you mean horses?"

"I mean a horse."

I smiled at him and sipped the brandy; it seemed very strong. "I don't bet," I explained.

"I suppose that's why you can afford double brandies," he answered. I wondered if that was a hint, if I

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should offer to buy him anything; but he had a tankard of beer in front of him, and I was afraid of his taking offense, so I said nothing.

"If you don't bet," he went on slyly, "what are you doing with a midday edition?"

"Oh, I wanted to see if there was any more news," I explained. And all the lightness instantly went out of his face and voice.

"No," he said in a hard tone, "there's nothing new. And by the time they do find her—she's about the same age as my Fiona, it makes you sweat, you can't keep an eye on them every second of the day and at that age they're so adventurous—"

There it was again, you see—the child, the child, always the child.

"I was referring to Mrs. Pettigrue," I told the young man.

He had stopped frowning a moment earlier; now his face shut again—it was like having a door slammed against you.

"That old phony!" he said.

I thought I'd misheard him. "She can't help being an old fogey," I pointed out.

"I didn't say fogey, I said phony. If you ask me, she's just an exhibitionist out to collar the limelight, keeping a lot of chaps on the run, and while they're out on a wild goose chase a little kid gets lured away—"

I hurriedly swallowed the rest of the brandy and for a moment I felt I couldn't speak. Then I said, "I suppose it's natural, if you've got a little girl of your own, to think children are more important; but you'll admit it's different for me."

He looked incredulous. Then he said, "You can't mean that? I mean, even you must realize that a child is ten times more important—why, there's no comparison."

For the first time in my life I knew what it meant to see red. You really do feel enveloped in a kind of blinding red mist. I think it was the "even" that did it. Everything was blotted out except a deep sense of outrage.

"How can you?" I stammered. "She's a human being, too." I had begun to shake; I wished I hadn't drunk that brandy so fast.

"Not to me she isn't. Human ghoul's more like it. Well, work it out for yourself. Mind you, at the start I thought the same as you did; poor old tottie, I thought, lost her memory or something, too bad. Till this black handbag turned up."

"What's the bag got to do with it?" I demanded. "They haven't even proved it's hers."

"Would you like to bet on it?" he asked. "I may not have much sense when it comes to horses, but I've plenty of horse sense when it comes to ordinary affairs. Who'd know about the bag being in the Tip except the one who put it there, and seeing it wasn't there the first time the police searched, who could have put it there but the old phony herself? And that isn't all: who else would want to call the police's atten-

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tion to its existence? Easy enough to pop up to London and post the card —why, I bet she's laughing like a zany right now!"

"And of course you can explain why she should want to do any such thing?" My own voice sounded thick in my ears.

"I told you, she wanted attention. Kids are like that—some of them bung a brick through a window, any window, because Mum takes more notice of the new baby than she does of Junior. These new babies, they've got a lot to answer for." Unexpectedly he put out his hand and removed my empty glass.

"Don't want to start breaking up the landlord's property on your first visit," he warned.

"There's nothing in it," I pointed out.

"I noticed that," he said, and grinned. Nearby somebody else giggled.

"Calm down, Ma," he told me. "Next time you should tell them to put more water in it."

He finished his beer and set the tankard on the table. Before I knew what I was going to do, my hand went out and snatched it up and I brought it crashing down on his head.

"Don't laugh at me," I panted, though I could hardly see him in the red mist that enclosed me. "I'm human, too." My arm was rising and falling—I don't know how often I struck him before someone caught my arm and dragged me away. I'd sometimes read of assailants striking a dozen blows where one or two would suffice, and I'd thought, What monsters! But it isn't so—you go on because you just can't stop. You're like a clock that has to strike twelve times at midday or midnight.

The place suddenly was bulging with people, and voices fumed. The door swung open, then someone shouted, "Make way." Two men appeared, carrying a stretcher.

"You can take that thing away," I told them. "I'm perfectly capable of getting home on my own feet. I've had just one brandy."

But no one was listening—the old again, you see. We don't count. The speaker stooped over the young man, who'd fallen out of his chair onto the floor; they were covering him with a blanket and carefully carrying him off. I began to say, "He must have been drunk" when another voice I'd never heard before, so thick with hatred it was like fur, said, "Shut the old besom's mouth."

"Charming!" I shouted. "But I've had enough insults for one day. I'm going home."

"You come with me," said the man who'd called "Make way." He caught my arm. "It'll be safer for you—this crowd could get nasty."

The mist was clearing again; it was pleasant to think there was someone with the instincts of a gentleman.

"I'm not accustomed to public houses," I explained.

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He had a car outside. "There's no need to drive me back," I said.

"We want you to come with us—we'll need a statement as to what happened. You were there."

"He insulted me," I said. The happenings of those past few minutes were all confused. He'd seemed such a pleasant young man, then suddenly—like the prince turning into the frog instead of the other way round—I heard myself explaining.

"Wait till we arrive," said the man. I hadn't immediately realized we were going to the police station. That's another place I'd never been to before, except once to report a lost brooch. At the station they put me in a room with a woman police officer, but she wasn't talkative.

"I don't know anything about it," she told me when I tried to find out what was happening. "They don't tell me, I just take orders." Quite the madam, I thought.

Then a sergeant came in and took the chair opposite me, and said he wanted to ask a few questions, but I didn't have to answer unless I wished, not until—

"You're cautioning me," I interrupted. "The way they do on television."

"We were doing it long before they thought of television," he assured me. "Well, so long as you understand the situation."

"I understand all right," I said. "That young man insulted me—he invited me to sit at his table, and then he insulted me."

I couldn't quite remember now what he had said, but it must have been something pretty unpardonable to drive me to such lengths. "How is he?" I asked. I had hit him pretty hard and hoped he didn't have a concussion.

"We're waiting for the hospital report," the sergeant told me. "He hasn't come to yet."

"He's young, he'll get over it," I said confidently.

"There's the possibility of brain damage, even if he does recover," the sergeant said quietly.

"Oh, nonsense!" I retorted. "You're saying that just to frighten me. I couldn't have done him *that* much harm. I'm only an old woman. That's it," I suddenly recalled. "He was telling me how unimportant old people are, that if they're missing who really cares?"

"Why did you do it?" the sergeant asked.

"I told you, he—"

"I don't mean why did you attack Constable Pickard—"

"You mean he was a policeman? That young man?"

"That's right."

"He didn't tell me."

"No reason why he should. He was off duty anyway. No, I mean, why did you start this thing at all—eh, *Miss Pettigrue?*"

Before I could get my breath back, he'd leaned across the table and whipped off my hat. I gave a yell and clapped my hands over my forehead, which gave him an opportu-

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nity of tweaking away my black eye-patch.

"All right," he said. "Daylight won't hurt that eye—there's nothing wrong with it. And it is *Miss* Pettigrue, isn't it? There never was a Mr. Pettigrue, was there? We've checked with National Insurance records," he went on, "and while we've found a Miss Elvira Pettigrue who draws her pension from Farm Street P.O., they don't know anything of a Mrs. P."

"I never knew there was any law preventing a person calling themselves anything they like," I panted.

"Well, there isn't, so long as they don't attempt to impersonate someone else. And you have a perfect right to disappear if you wish—"

"You didn't think that a fortnight ago."

"Because you were represented to us as a person in need of care. There had been that blackout you'd reported to your doctor—only you didn't have a blackout, did you?"

Well, of course I hadn't had a blackout—people who have blackouts can't lay plans as adroitly as I had, changing my appearance, booking the room at the boarding house two weeks before I "disappeared"; but I had to be sure someone would realize I'd gone, and I knew Dr. Lewis wouldn't take No for an answer. She's the sort of woman who never leaves any stone unturned, no matter what unpleasant creatures may be hidden under it.

"What makes you so sure I'm the missing woman?" I remembered to ask.

"In a way you might say it was a bit of luck for the police. A lady came in here earlier this afternoon to report the loss of a wallet. She'd been sitting in the park—she was sure she had it then—talking to an old lady answering your description—that black patch made you very noticeable, you know—and you'd been talking about old Mrs. Pettigrue. She said you got quite worked up—you might almost have been the old girl yourself, she said. Mind you, she didn't really believe that, any more than she thought you'd taken the money—most likely she'll find she didn't have it with her when she set out; the number of ladies who do that would surprise you . . . but well, when *this* broke and someone at the Fox and Grapes remembered hearing you talking about Mrs. Pettigrue—well, we started putting two and two together. You gave your name at the desk outside as Mrs. Henrietta Gale and your address as the Aston—"

"'It's where I'm living at present."

"So we checked and found you arrived there the same day Mrs. Pettigrue went missing."

"I'm sure you always won first prize for arithmetic at your school," I congratulated him. "Well, is that all? Because they don't like it if you're late for dinner and I'm going to be late." I glanced at the watch on my wrist; it didn't seem possible so much time could have passed.

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"Oh, but you haven't answered my question yet," he said. "Why did you do it?"

"Why?" I began to shake again. "Are you a married man, Sergeant?"

"True enough I am," he said.

"With children, I daresay. And colleagues and acquaintances and friends?" He nodded to all of these, and then I let him have it, both barrels.

"In that case how can you hope to understand what it's like to be old and unwanted, just a bit of the flotsam and jetsam of life, with nobody to care or even to notice if you're living or dead? Just once in your life, before the end, wouldn't you want to be the most important person in the room? To know someone was thinking about you, even if it wasn't a particularly nice thought? All my life . . ." and the words boiled out.

I couldn't stop myself any more than I could stop banging that young constable on the head with the tankard. I remembered them all —my mother, my father (fortunate for you you've got a home, you're not the marrying kind, and no brains), just years and years of serving behind a counter and getting a tiny pension after half a lifetime; and no lovers, no pleasures ever—Miss Sixty-Plus-and-never-been-kissed, I once heard a shop assistant jeer, and the awful thing wasn't that she said it, but that it was true.

He heard me out very patiently; when I stopped for lack of breath he said, "Yes, I wondered if it might be that. A case of the sins of the fathers being visited in this instance on Constable Pickard. All the same, even with the black patch and discarding the hairpiece, it was taking a risk. Weren't you afraid someone would recognize you? After all, everyone comes to London sooner or later."

"You haven't understood a word I've said," I told him, black with disappointment. "Of course I wasn't afraid. I could recognize my own features when I looked in the mirror, but nobody else would—*because nobody else has ever really seen them.*"

He sighed. "I'm afraid we can't let you go back yet. There couldn't be any question of bail, not now. We'll need a medical report, too."

"If you're going to try and make out I'm mad you can forget about it," I said. "I knew precisely what I was doing."

"I think you'd better talk to a lawyer before you make that sort of statement," he warned me. "You'll get a certificate for legal aid if the magistrate agrees."

"The magistrate? You mean. I'm going *into court?*"

"There's bound to be a charge, unless you're considered unfit to plead. Grievous bodily harm will be the least of it. He was one of our best young men," he added.

But there were plenty of people to think about Constable Pickard. I had other things on my mind.

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"You really think it will come to trial?" I said anxiously.

"I don't see how it can be avoided. I'm sure you understand that," he added. "We'll send a message to your hotel to say you've been detained for the night—"

But I didn't care about that either. I was seeing myself—in court—in the dock—the place packed with people, reporters, cameras, and everyone staring, staring—not at the Judge in his robes of office, or at Counsel in their ridiculous wigs, and certainly not at the jury, but at me—Elvira Pettigrue, spinster, late of Trent House, Holmshurst. A line of poetry ran into my mind:

"Fools, for I also had my hour . . ."

I was sorry about the constable, of course, but it's all in the Bible. My father was a clergyman and we were brought up on the Good Book. It is expedient that one man should die for the people, yes, even if the people are just a multitude of tiresome old women no one wants. Mind you, I didn't believe he was going to die, but even if he did—well, you can't have a sacrifice without a victim. And when you remember about whom those words were said, Our Lord Himself, He Who was without sin—well, in a sense isn't that a greater destiny for an aspiring young officer than even ending up as a big name and with a private office at Scotland Yard?

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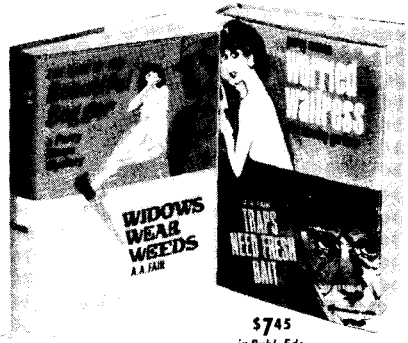

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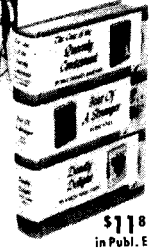

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